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Prologue

The stars twinkled in the night sky, trying their best to shed their light on the people below, their tiny quills of light seeping into the darkness. The moon was a slim crescent in the sky. It would be larger tomorrow night, but for now it was a tiny sliver in the night sky.

But that isn't where this story begins. The beauty of the night can only take you so far, after all.

A flicker of a screen. A smile in the darkness.

There he was again, playing a game on his laptop while lying on his bed. This was a normal occurrence for the stars-and-stripes, and happened at least once per night.

His excited voice rose over the small noises of the game, "Great job, Rei!"

"Thanks, you did great, too." Another voice responded from the headphones haphazardly leaning off of the bed.

"Nah, you're the one who's really carrying me here."

Not like our starry friend could see it, but his friend smiled a little bit on the other side of the line. "No, you are the only reason I stayed alive during that battle, so you should get the credit."

Did I forget to mention they're extremely stubborn? No? Well, they're extremely stubborn. Not sure if that's good or not, but I guess we'll find out soon.

Their lives, for the most part, are ordinary and happy. Though their lives could be better, the two wouldn't trade away these moments of happiness for anything in the whole wide world.

But the stars of fate are awfully cruel. They are porcupines, dipping their beautiful, starlit quills into the night sky. They are

astonishingly beautiful, but prickly to the touch.

And though those with hopes and dreams bigger than the whole world itself never expect it, when you reach too far into the night sky, the land of endless dreams and opportunity, you get pricked by those nasty, deceiving, starlit quills and

Tumble

Down

Towards the ground, towards a hopeless tomorrow, and, sometimes, towards death.

Maybe someone should've told them that. Maybe their mothers or older siblings should've told them that you shouldn't put your heart on your sleeve. That you shouldn't go up to the stars without a parachute or another person to catch you when you fall from those dazzling, starlit heights.

Oh, well.

It's too late now.

Day Zero

Russia closed the door behind him as he stumbled into his room. Russia glanced at the time and smiled. One hour until Cosmos went online. Until then, Russia did his homework from school. After a little less than one hour, Russia's computer chimed. Russia beamed, instantly abandoning his homework, putting on his headphones, and sliding over to his computer, entering the chat room he and Cosmos made. At one point in time, Ukraine and Cosmos's brother, whose username was Syrupy_Seaoh (though Cosmos kept on calling him "Caninator" for some reason), were in the group chat too, but they left a few weeks earlier when they got bored of the video game that Cosmos and Russia would always play together. However, Russia knows that the two are still in contact with each other, which is always nice. Russia opened their chatbox and began to type.

Rei: hey cosmos

Cosmos: Hi, I see you're still being a creep and paying attention to when I come online.

Russia chuckled lightly and started typing a response.

Rei: what are you talking about? ever heard of notifications?

Cosmos: Yeah, no, that doesn't make you any less creepy if that's what you're trying to get across.

Rei: wow

Cosmos: Hey, don't be salty with me, we both know it's true that you secretly stalk people, your secret's safe with me.

Rei: pfft, ok, sure

Cosmos: You didn't deny it~

Rei: shut up

Cosmos: :)

Rei: wanna play Geltheim?

Cosmos: Yup

Russia smiled and immediately pulled up their game, Geltheim. It was a fantasy game with healers and everything, pretty basic stuff, but he and Cosmos met through this game, so they often play it together for nostalgia's sake. Also because they're one of the top guilds in the game and, well, *bragging rights*. Russia is a paladin while Cosmos is a wizard. When Russia asked Cosmos why he chose to be a wizard, Cosmos simply responded that doing magic sounded fun, so he chose it and that's all there was to it.

Russia didn't know what they were going to do in Geltheim just yet, but he knew that with Cosmos it was always fun. Even being stuck in the shop is made an adventure by him- he always manages to make Russia smile and laugh when he's having a bad day. Russia's always sure of that. Cosmos didn't take anything for granted, and made every small moment amazing. Russia loved that about Cosmos-

Not that he likes Cosmos or anything! Cosmos is a guy and that just- That's just weird. And wrong.

Russia quickly pushed those thoughts away as he heard Cosmos's excited voice say, "Are you ready to defeat the goblin king?!"

Russia smiled even though Cosmos couldn't see it and quickly responded, "Ready whenever you are."

--x--

America shouted in victory when the goblin king fell on the ground, "We did it, Rei! We did it!"

"Ow, you don't have to yell in my ear about it." Rei responded with a small chuckle that America picked up on. Defeating the goblin king was a piece of cake, but America was so ridiculously happy that his joy must have been contagious.

"Oh, sorry. I just got excited." Speaking of excited, America glanced towards his checklist on the other side of his hospital room. He hadn't taken his medicine yet today. That might be a problem.

America heard the incoming, familiar footsteps of his nurse. Oh no. America quickly shouted out, "Sorry Rei, but I really gotta go! I'll rejoin the chat in like half an hour, wait for me!"

Just as America quickly slid his laptop out of view, his nurse came in. His nurse was a human named Darcy. Darcy is really nice; however, she also gets way too concerned for America's health sometimes and usually whenever she sees America on call with Rei, she gets nervous because she knows how excited America can get with friends- she has been his nurse for seven years now, after all.

You see, America was born with a heart defect. His heart just didn't develop right in the womb. When he was born, his heart had a hole inside it and it's valves didn't work right either. Not to mention, his heart was very weak. The doctors honestly didn't think he'd last the night. However, with France's and Britain's permission, a group of surgeons did an overnight surgery on America's heart. They patched up the hole in America's heart the best they could and they tried to repair his heart's valves. Due to the last minute surgery, little baby America pulled through and survived. According to stories America was told, America's mom cried in joy when she got to see her baby alive, even though it was through a screen.

Even so, that surgery didn't fully fix the problem. The valves didn't repair like they should've, and America's weak heart made it practically impossible for him to have a normal childhood. For the first few years of his life, America could vividly remember their home, how startlingly big it was, and the day Aussie and Kiwi were born- he was five while Canada was four. America was so happy that day, but his parents were way more happy than America was.

America can guess why they were so happy, though. He isn't that dumb. France and Britain just had two more normal, non-defected children, after all. America couldn't blame them, though. He was just happy that his parents were happy. That's all that mattered. America didn't care that Canada and Dad could play catch outside while he had to stay inside because he was sick, he didn't care that

he got left out of family activities because he was too sick to- he just wanted his family to be happy. Watching their happy faces from a distance was enough for America, even though all he wanted was to laugh and smile with them, no matter what they were doing.

But when America was 10, just two months before middle school started, his heart went haywire. Out of nowhere, America started coughing really bad and couldn't breathe. Not only that, but his heartbeat was crazy and irregular. America could remember Mom begging him not to die on her while Dad quickly called for an ambulance, terrified for his son.

America was taken to the hospital and the doctor, after stabilizing America's heart and breathing, told France and Britain that America's heart had somehow worsened and they feared that if America wasn't kept under close medical watch, he might die. So, his parents opted for the safest option: have America basically live at the hospital. Ever since that day, America's heart never beat the same. Its solid rhythm was now erratic, inconsistent, and irregular.

At first, America hated the hospital. He hated the food, he hated the fact that he couldn't run down the stairs, get yelled at for running despite his bad heart, and then get to taste his mom's wonderful crepes and, occasionally, Canada's signature pancakes.

America also hated the sound of people coughing down the halls, hated all the noise, and hated how so many people could forget he existed in the hospital.

The first few nights, America couldn't sleep. Even though his family visited him every day, it wasn't the same. France wasn't there to read America to sleep with bedtime stories (which sounds childish, but America loved those bedtime stories to bits) and if America had a nightmare, he couldn't crawl into his parent's bed and expect comfort and warmth. More often than not, America would wake up in a cold sweat and would have to stay there, crying his eyes out all alone and then gasping to breathe due to overworking himself. Again.

But, to say the least, America got used to it after seven years. Why wouldn't he? Honestly, America's kinda glad he's in the hospital. He

only gets one hour of school each day; so, I guess it sucks to suck, high schoolers. Either way, America had found one really good best friend and that's all he needs.

He doesn't mind that he doesn't have any real friends.

He doesn't care that family visits are, at most, twice a week nowadays.

He doesn't.

He can't.

He has to be grateful, he has to be selfless, he has to be strong for everyone, because his heart is obviously too weak for that.

So America doesn't mind it at all that he might never have a normal life, he's just glad he gets to breathe in air every day. America's just glad that he wakes up every morning; and, even though the hospital food will always be terrible in America's esteemed opinion, America's just glad that he can eat food another day.

"America?" Darcy, who was warmly smiling, snapped her fingers in front of America's face to snap him out of his trance. "It's time for dinner." She glanced at the checklist quickly and added, "And it's time for you to take your meds."

America crossed his arms and joked, "What if I don't wanna?"

Darcy raised an eyebrow playfully, "Well then, I might just have to ban you from your computer games for a while and force you to do- uhhh- other things."

America hissed, "Noooooooo, anything but that! That'll kill a gamer like me!"

"Deal with it," Darcy smiled, handing America two pills. America stuck out his tongue in defiance, grabbed his medicine, and swallowed them without any water. Darcy shivered, "After two years of you doing that I still can't get used to it, you weirdo."

"I'm just *that* good," America boasted, crossing his arms.

"That's what you want to believe," Darcy laughed.

America suddenly shot Darcy a betrayed look and held his hand to his chest, falling backwards onto his bed, "Et tu, Brute?"

Darcy only laughed louder, "C'mon you little runt, let's get some food."

America quickly shot up and off his bed, having to stop for a second to catch his breath. Once he was ready to go, America and Darcy walked off to the hospital cafeteria. Darcy used to deliver America's food to him, but Darcy quickly learned that physically bringing America there would help satiate America's endless boredom.

As America grabbed his food, Darcy started making sure she did all of her daily tasks while keeping a close eye on America. She filled out the rest of her report, and looked at the data already collected on America. She chewed her lips nervously about some of the things they said and, when she was done, closed her work binder. Just as she was finished, America walked with his food as quickly as he was allowed to towards where Darcy was. Darcy could hear him wheeze a little bit, and took note.

Once America was done with his meal, Darcy took him back to his hospital room and advised him to get a good night's rest. Once the door closed, however, America did the exact opposite and pulled out his laptop given to him by his Dad for his 14th birthday. It was a little bit old, but it did its job.

He opened up his group chat with Rei and immediately started spamming the chat.

Cosmos: Hey Rei, you there?

Cosmos: Reiiiiiii

Cosmos: Stop doing homework and join meeeeeee

America was about to spam the chat more when Rei responded.

Rei: what's so wrong with getting good grades

Cosmos: They destroy your sleeping schedule. That might just be school, actually.

Rei: nah, you're the one who destroys my sleeping schedule

Cosmos: Ouchhhhh, second time someone betrayed me today. What are you, the Roman Senate?

Rei: what no

Cosmos: I am Julius Caesar, bow before me

Rei: no

Cosmos: D:<

Rei: so are we gonna play more or nah

Cosmos: How dare thoust change thy subject!

Rei: ...

Rei: i'm playing and you can't stop me

Cosmos: >:c

Rei has left the chat

Cosmos: Wait nooooooooo don't leave

Cosmos: Dang it, guess I'm joining

Cosmos has left the chat

--x--

Russia chuckled as Cosmos's character showed up in their guild lobby and as Cosmos plugged his headphones in. Almost immediately, Russia heard Cosmos's childish voice clearly in his own headphones.

"How dare you abandon me!" Cosmos exclaimed, his character making a mad emote in game.

Russia chuckled, "For your information, you're the one who made me abandon my homework, so I think it's karma."

"It's not my fault you want to play with me,"

Russia paused for a moment, shrugged, and, realizing Cosmos couldn't see him shrug, said, "Fair point, fair point. So, what are we gonna do today? Defeat another goblin king?"

"Nope!" Cosmos replied, obviously excited, "We're going to defeat a dragon!"

"A dragon?" Russia asked, raising an eyebrow. Is Cosmos serious? Sure, Cosmos can be a bit crazy sometimes, and Russia loves him for that, but is he being serious? They could defeat a dragon if they truly wanted to, but that would be a tough battle Russia didn't want to fight.

"A dragon." Cosmos confirmed almost immediately. Russia sighed and Cosmos heard it. "Hey," Cosmos started, "What's wrong, Rei Rei?"

Russia felt himself become a bit flustered at the nickname and gritted his teeth. "I told you not to call me that."

"Sorry, Rei Rei." That little *fucker*, he did it again.

"Cosmos." Russia said sternly, it was as if he was chastising a child. A small, adorable child.

"Sorry." Russia heard Cosmos apologize faintly. Cosmos's voice sounded so sad.

Russia sighed, "No, I'm just overreacting." His heart hurt to hear Cosmos so sad. But, that pain disappeared as soon as Russia thought about it. 'NOPE, NOT TODAY, SATAN' Russia thought to himself, not today, stupid feelings.

You see, ever since a few weeks ago, Russia's being feeling weird feelings while talking and playing with Cosmos. Sure, Russia really loves how he puts his heart and soul into everything he does, how Cosmos always manages to make Russia smile, Cosmos's laugh, how

Cosmos's positive energy could light up a room (or in this case a chatroom), and how even if Cosmos and Russia lose, Cosmos would always laugh it off and make jokes about it. But, Cosmos is Russia's *friend*, no more. Russia's not gay. Heck, being gay is just *wrong*.

Probably.

"Does this mean I can call you Rei Rei?" Cosmos asked excitedly, his sadness disappearing into thin air.

"No."

"Dang it," Cosmos muttered under his breath, making Russia laugh.

Russia smiled and shot back, "Did little Cosy use a safe word?"

"Reiiiiiiiiii, whyyyyyy."

Russia snorted, "What do you mean, why? You gave me a nickname and pestered me with it, I have the right to do the same." Russia could hear Cosmos pout on the other side.

"But I'm not allowed to use your nickname, meanie." Cosmos whined, emphasizing the "your."

Russia suddenly realized something, he doesn't think he's ever heard Cosmos say a swear word, "Hmm I just realized something, how come you don't swear? I've never heard you swear once." Russia asked bluntly, since that was on his mind.

Cosmos hummed and then responded, "Well, I don't swear because that's mean, but also because I save my curse words for when I really need them. Mainly so that when I use them people can tell that I'm really mad and often that's more terrifying than someone using curse words all the time. That, and also because whenever I use curse words scarcely, they have so much more meaning."

Russia was kind of shocked by that answer. He didn't think something so simple would be something Cosmos would think so deeply about, "I'm... kinda impressed you thought so deeply into something so simple."

"Pfft, when you have as much free time as a loser like me, you have a lot of time to think about stupid things." Cosmos responded, insulting himself.

"You're not a loser, you're a really good person." Russia immediately said without thinking. And he meant it, too.

"Awww, Rei~" Cosmos cooed, "You're so sweet~"

Russia's face immediately went red at the comment, already guessing what would happen next, "NOPE! DON'T YOU DARE-" But before Russia could continue, Ukraine yelled at him from his room.

"SHUT UP! I'M TRYING TO DO HOMEWORK!"

After a few moments of mortified silence, Cosmos burst out laughing, "Was that Raine? Dang, we haven't played together in forever! We should totally all play together as a party together, I'll see if I can get my bro to join us!"

Russia slightly smiled, Cosmos's excitement and happiness- coupled with nostalgia- warming up his heart, "Yeah, let's get everyone together again, that could be a lot of fun."

"Yesssss! Thank you, thank you!" Cosmos said excitedly, "Now, I think we were going to find and fight a dragon?"

"Oh, right! Almost forgot about that," Russia admitted, quickly getting his hands in the right place for the controls.

"You ready?" Cosmos asked.

"Ready whenever you are." Russia smiled.

"Then let's go!"

And even when the dragon ended up beating them to a pulp, Cosmos laughed and smiled, joking it off like Russia knew he would. And, in that moment while Russia was distracted by how cheerful and amazing Cosmos was, Russia's heart knew who it belonged to.

... Even though it's owner would probably disagree.

--x--

America woke up the next day and sighed, glancing at his clock. He had about an hour until school. As far as America knew, a lot of people actually went to in-hospital schooling in, well, *the hospital*, but most of them weren't there for long. The only person who has stayed long enough at the hospital for America to know their name is a country named Antarctica.

Antarctica has to stay at the hospital due to a non-contagious disease he got called Climate Change. Considering Antarctica is basically the only non-online friend America has that isn't his family, America feels really bad for Antarctica. As far as America knows, though, it's a slower disease. Even so, Antarctica will probably die young, which makes America sad... not like America has a bright future, either. As far as America knows, Antarctica also has a boyfriend named Greenland who apparently visits Antarctica every day. America wished he had someone who loved him enough to visit every day.

Not like his visits from his family weren't enough or that his family didn't love him! It's just... they stopped coming daily several years ago. They just didn't have enough time to.

They just didn't have enough time for him...

America quickly pushed his thoughts away. Just because his family doesn't visit everyday doesn't mean they don't love him! It doesn't... Either way, today is friday! His family always visits America on fridays! America was so excited. He and Canada could play board games and maybe Australia will get into another argument with Kiwi again, or they might all just talk! America was fine with whatever, he just wanted to be his family.

Now that America was filled with excitement and energy, America hopped out of bed, got dressed, and practically raced towards the room where school was held. As expected, Antarctica was there and excitedly waved towards America. America waved back and quickly rushed over, wheezing due to overexertion.

Antarctica smiled happily asked, "Today's the day, right?" Or well, *signed*. You see, Antarctica is mute. I guess America forgot to mention that. Once America realized Antarctica is a permanent resident like him, America decided to learn sign language in an attempt to satiate his endless boredom. America chose to learn ASL, American sign language, which was luckily a sign language Antarctica knew. Because he had so much free time, America actually spoke a lot of languages. America was taught French by his mom, who spoke a lot in French when America was a small child, but other than that, America taught himself languages such as Spanish, Madarin, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Korean. Though, he's currently learning Russian, German, and Japanese (for an online friend he has that speaks it). Anyway, let's go back on topic.

America smiled at Antarctica and signed back, "Yeah, my family's coming today. What about Greenland, huh? Are you two going to be cute today?" America gave Antarctica a suggestive look.

Antarctica went red and started freaking out, shaking his head while emphatically signing, "No! It's not like *that*, you hamburger!"

America snorted. *Hamburger*. Last he checked, America wasn't German, but ok. America signed back while wiggling his eyebrows, "You know you wanna."

America burst out laughing when he saw Antarctica's face. It was a mixture of crazy blushing and "what the heck is wrong with you" that just made America's day. America, while laughing, shakily signed, "I'm kidding! I'm kidding!" Once America had finally calmed down and looked Antarctica in the face, he continued, "... unless?" With one single word, America burst out laughing once again, which was followed by awful coughing. Antarctica's face, which was red out of anger and his own blush, suddenly switched to that of worry. Antarctica tried helping his friend by patting America's back, but that didn't work. After a few panicked seconds of Antarctica not knowing what to do, America reached for his bag while still coughing and signed for Antarctica to wait. After a few minutes of waiting, America stopped coughing and grabbed a pill, swallowing it.

Antarctica got America's attention and worriedly signed, "Are you ok?"

America smiled and signed back, "I'm fine, this just happens whenever I overwork myself or laugh too hard."

Antarctica frowned and signed, "It shouldn't," Antarctica sighed, sitting down in a nearby desk. "Do you ever wish you were normal?" Antarctica hesitantly signed, unsure if this was crossing any sort of line.

America paused for a moment before replying, "Yeah, all the time. Sometimes I think that if I was normal I could be at home with my family, I could meet all my online friends -Heck, I'd get to go to a real school! I don't care if the school day lasts longer, I just-" America paused, hesitating, "- I just want to be able to laugh without coughing and wheezing. I want to be able to run and jump and never worry about trying to make sure my heart doesn't beat too fast. I want to be able to sing without wheezing after every measure. I want to play sports! But, most of all, I want to live... " America hesitantly stopped, sorrow creeping inside his heart. He wanted to do all the things he never can.

Antarctica frowned with pity at America before signing, "What about your heart transplant, you're still on the list, right?"

America nodded, "Yeah, they said it might take another year for me to get a heart, but I am still on the list."

"Then, when you're 18 in a year you can do everything you ever wanted to do! You'll have your freedom, you'll be able to run and jump and sing and everything! At least you can look forward to that!" Antarctica smiled, "All you have to do is wait one more year! I believe you can do it!"

America laughed and smiled, "You're too pure for this world, Antarctica."

Antarctica tilted his head and signed, "Okay?"

Just as America was about to respond, the door was flung open and

their teacher, Ms. Davis, stepped in. "Alright, class!" She boomed, "Get in your seats and be quiet!"

America chuckled and signed to Antarctica, "Does this count as being silent?"

Antarctica played along, "I dunno, does it?"

"Antarctica, America, don't think I can't see you back there!" Ms. Davis proclaimed, scaring Antarctica half to death.

America, who was expecting this, cleared his throat and stood up and started imitating a businessman, "Excuse me, miss. You said no talking and, well, we weren't talking. Plus, I think it's unfair you called us out simply because you know our names."

Ms. Davis smiled, "Well, I don't go by technicalities, America. Please sit down."

"Taxation without representation- oh wait wrong one- Injustice!" America shouted out, refusing to sit down. Antarctica started giggling (without any noise) at America

And so America went, being a complete idiot and class clown at the same time.

Ah, good times.

--x--

America excitedly had lunch and went to his hospital room after class was dismissed. His family would show up in four hours- he was so excited!

America opened the door to his room and saw Darcy standing inside. Darcy turned because of the noise the door made and saw America. "Oh! America, there you are."

"What's up, Darcy?" America asked, smiling, "How come you're here?"

Darcy tightly pursed her lips. "We had a change in schedule, so we

must run a few check-ups on your heart. Also, once we're done with the check-ups I must tell you something."

"Oh, okay, cool, how long will it take?"

"About an hour." Darcy replied, "Now, follow me, we have to hurry if we want to stay on schedule."

"Gotcha, doc." America responded, doing finger guns with his hands and following Darcy out of his room and into the hallway. "So," America started, trying to break the awkward silence that had settled into the air, "What's with the sudden change in schedule?"

Darcy sighed, "Your doctor realized that your previous check-up results looked sketchy, so we're doing the check-up again because someone probably rendered the data wrong."

America nodded, not knowing what else to say. The silence between them continued until they got to a room America was all too familiar with. Darcy, as well as a few other nurses and America's doctor who decided to stop by, took the usual tests on America. Once they were done, Darcy escorted America back to his room. America noticed that she looked nervous but didn't comment on it.

Once they finally got to America's room, Darcy stopped at the doorway and played with her wavy brown hair. "So, about what I needed to tell you..." She sighed, "I'm so sorry about this America, but your parents called while you were in class to say they aren't able to visit this week."

America froze at those words and stared at Darcy, who was clutching a strand of her hair as if this was somehow her fault. America clenched his fists and fought back tears, a million thoughts flying through his head. Plastering a smile on his face, America looked at Darcy and said, "That's okay, it's not your fault or anything, they're probably just busy!"

Darcy's confused gaze shot up to America like he was an alien or something, "Are you... sure?"

America happily nodded, "It's okay, plus I get to play more video

games now!"

Darcy gave a tight frown and looked down, "If you say so..." With that, she walked off. The minute she was out of sight, America quickly rushed to close the door, the tears he'd been holding back streaming down his face. America practically collapsed onto the floor, wheezing and sobbing. He knew he should calm down for the sake of his weak heart, but the tears kept flowing down his cheeks. As much as he pretended he didn't care, he *did*. The thought of Greenland suddenly flew into America's mind, making him sob harder. Greenland showed up here every day, so why couldn't his family show up at least once a week- do they not care about him?

America knew it wasn't true because if it was, he wouldn't be in the hospital right now, but America couldn't help himself from thinking that his family didn't care. He's the sick son, the imperfect son that can't go on family trips and lives all alone in the hospital. He's the forgotten son who only has three friends, two of which he doesn't even know what they look like. While sobbing, America pulled out his phone and looked at his contacts. Why didn't his family tell him that they weren't coming this week themselves? Was he really that much of an afterthought?

After crying for what felt like hours, America had no more tears to cry. They just wouldn't flow anymore. America looked at the time and noticed it was time to play Geltheim with Rei, but America didn't want to talk to anyone right now- he wanted to be alone to drown in his sorrow. America, at some point, went to sit on his bed in surprising numbness. He didn't want to be in the hospital right now, so he started stumbling to the next best thing, the courtyard.

The courtyard is really nice, especially during the night. It was 6 p.m. right now, around when he and Rei would play Geltheimso that America could slack off on eating the awful hospital food. America felt bad for ghosting Rei like his parents to him but he just... just didn't want to talk to anyone eight. He really is a horrible friend, isn't he? Now that America thought about it, Rei's school would be released for summer break soon, which means they'd have more time to play Geltheim together. The thought brought inexplicable happiness to America's heart.

America watched the sun set, and let it help calm him. He felt a chilly breeze brush upon him and looked up to see clouds. America hummed and guessed that it might rain tonight. With one final calming breath, America headed inside to eat. America got himself some ice cream and nothing else.

I mean, c'mon, his family just abandoned him, he can eat all the ice cream he wants.

Once America was done with his ice cream, he meandered down the halls until he reached his room. To America's surprise, Darcy was pacing outside of his room. As America got closer, he faked happiness and shouted out, "Hi Darcy! What's up!" At the sound of America's voice, her head shot up and her worried face quickly morphed into one of relief.

"Oh thank goodness! I thought you had run off somewhere because of..." Darcy trailed off.

"Nah, I just got food." America lied, omitting the fact he *had* run off because of his family's choice not to come this week, but America knew he would survive. It wasn't the first time his parent's didn't have time for him and it most certainly won't be the last. He's the unwanted, sick child, after all.

Darcy nodded. "Your doctor, Doctor Lin, wanted to talk with you when you got back. I'll call him over."

America shot Darcy a confused look, "How come?"

Darcy just shrugged and mouthed, "I dunno."

After a few minutes, Dr. Lin arrived with a solemn look on his face. "Hi, America. Let's head inside instead of obstructing the hallway, hm?"

America glanced nervously at Darcy before heading inside his room, turning on the lights, and sitting on his bed. America watched as Dr. Lin plopped down onto a nearby chair while Darcy stayed standing, looking at a binder Dr. Lin passed to her with an unreadable expression.

Dr. Lin sighed and gave America a weak, tired smile. America got the hint that a bomb was about to be dropped on him and he didn't know how to prepare. A part of his brain, however, *knew*. Even so, America pushed those thoughts away. No, that isn't what they're going to talk about. They're probably going to talk about how his family switched visiting schedules. Again. For the fourth time this year.

Even so, America nervously fidgeted with his fingers. Dr. Lin sighed and started speaking, "So, we thought the check-up results we took a few days ago were faulty, because you've been so stable for the past few years; but, after the tests we took today we can confirm that somehow your condition has gotten worse."

America's breath caught in his throat. His heart... got worse? America couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he couldn't-

But the doctor kept on speaking, oblivious to America's panic.

"One of your valves is deteriorating and keeps on spilling blood into your arteries, obstructing the blood flow. Your heart is already weak enough as it is, so your heart can't compensate for the blood spilling out of your atrium by pumping more."

"Everything will be fine, though, right?" America frantically questioned, starting to panic. "You can just do surgery to replace the valves with machinery, right? I read about it online, so everything will be fine-"

"America..." Dr. Lin interrupted, pity evident in his eyes. "It's not that simple... we could, theoretically, do it, but your heart hasn't fully grown. If we put in mechanic valves, it could harm your heart and you might die- it's too risky."

"So then what can we do?!" America yelled out, wheezing and panicking. He didn't want to die, he just had one more year, one more year-

America felt Dr. Lin's hand on his back and looked up at the doctor, tears in his eyes. The doctor knelt down in front of America, grief in his eyes, "There's nothing we can do other than wait for the right

heart."

America shakily tried wiping away his tears, but they kept on flowing, "B-but how much time d-do I e-even have to w-wait?" America wheezed out, his voice shaking and scared.

Dr. Lin pursed his lips and responded simply, "We estimate maybe about four weeks at best."

America's breath caught in his throat again. Four weeks? Four weeks left of living? No, but he could get a heart in that time. But America *knew.* After 7 years he had never gotten the right heart. He had been stuck on the waiting list for *7 years*. America numbly watched as Mr. Lin left and Darcy whispered, "I'm so sorry," None of it, not a single word or action truly registered in his brain.

Not only did his family not care enough to visit him today, but he would probably die in a month.

Isn't that a sick joke?

"Well, *universe,* my life isn't just some sick joke!" America yelled out suddenly. But his angered cry fell on deaf ears. No one would hear him. He was just a sick, defected loser with no friends. No one would care if he died. He would never be able to do all the things he wanted to do. He would just die, cold and alone in a hospital without his family by his side, without friends to try and cheer him up, and without someone who loved him enough to visit him everyday. In his tears, America realized something.

He doesn't want to die like this: trapped in a cold and lifeless room. If he was going to die, he would die by the side of the only person who ever truly cared about him.

America scrambled over to the side of the hospital room and quickly grabbed a pencil and a stack of paper, each one with a different purpose. America started writing a different message on almost every piece of paper. America scrambled downstairs, quickly stealing a permanent marker and 9 envelopes. He shoved the papers into their own envelopes and labeled 6 of them the numbers 1-6. The two others were left blank while the final one had the words

"Final Boss!" jokingly written on it. That letter almost made America cry. America quickly changed into his most comfortable clothes (a hoodie and skinny jeans) and searched his hospital room for an old backpack he insisted on getting when he was ten. America's pretty sure he wanted it because he would have school in the hospital and he wanted to be prepared. To humor a younger America, Britain got him it. Spoiler alert: America never used it, until today, that is. Once America found the backpack, he shoved the labeled envelopes inside along with a thousand dollars worth of birthday money he never used from relatives, gift cards, his phone, his beta blockers (medicine), a toothbrush and toothpaste, an old mp3 player America bought when he was 12, and a ton of clothes. Giving his room one last look, he left one of the unlabelled envelopes behind, never to look back or go inside that cold prison ever again.

America scrambled downstairs to the lobby, pretending to be a patient's family member, which was pretty easy to fake due to how many people who work at the hospital are too caught up in their work to notice a certain teenage boy. He went to a small postal office inside the hospital and asked for the other unlabelled envelope to be sent to Antarctica's room. Finally, he asked for the envelope labelled "1" to be mailed to a specific house address that America could never forget. How could he? It was the address he'd been dying to go to for forever. Finally, America went out to the courtyard, and, like he presumed, it was pouring. America went to the darkest section of the courtyard, made sure he had everything with him, and made sure he left his laptop behind- he wouldn't be needing it where he was going. After America made sure he had everything, he grabbed letter number two and put it in a nearby bush, jumped over the fence at the edge of the courtyard, and started walking down the hill the hospital was on.

America only had four weeks left to live, and he's gonna make sure he'll never regret this life he's been given, even if it's the last thing he'll do.

Starting with today, the worst day of his life, he's going to be free.

Day One

America had looked at maps of his hometown for the longest time. Pangea, home of all the countries. They named it after the first country ever 'cause why not. It's not like she's alive to disapprove of the name anyway.

And now that America finally was able to see the bright lights of the city from afar during the night, he couldn't say he liked it. America had grown used to the dimness of the town his hospital was in. He had grown used to the fact that if you squint hard enough while looking outside your window, the stars twinkling in the night sky looked like lost, stumbling porcupines. Thinking about it, America could've been put in the city hospital, but the hospital America ended up in had better heart treatments available, so his family opted for it. Plus, it was quieter.

America sat on top of a bridge he had seen in photos online so many times that he couldn't count. Since he was so frustratingly bored, he would do that a lot. This bridge was one of his favorite places to look at... It looked prettier in photos. The glistening, bright sky he saw in all those photos had vanished behind the murky darkness of a rainy day. America looked down at the rapid, twisting water below and felt his stomach twist with it. He had never been very high up during his time at the hospital, so the drop before him terrified him. America scolded himself. He only had four weeks left to live and *this* is what he's afraid of?

He shouldn't be afraid of anything now that he was gonna die anyway. Why would it matter in the end? It's just a few extra weeks of living. In the grand scheme of America's life, a few weeks won't make much of a difference.

Except America knew that he had to force it to make a difference. This is his one shot to finally be himself, he's not gonna mess it up now. He can't mess it up now. America reached inside his pocket until he felt the cool glass of his phone screen. America pulled his phone out and looked at it sorrowfully.

"I'm sorry, my friend," America said as if he was making a speech at a funeral. "You have served me well for so long, I deeply regret doing this- but I must. I cannot let anyone find me and ruin my plans for the best few weeks ever. I'm sorry comrade, but you must die."

As if he was acting out the role of his phone in an overly-dramatic play, America moved the phone from side to side while saying "America, wait, please!" in a high-pitched voice.

America went back to his normal voice and held his phone dearly, "I am sorry, phone, I never meant this, I can't throw you away... SIKE!"

And with that, America threw his phone off the bridge, once again switching to a high-pitched voice, gradually getting softer as his phone went further away from him, "NOOOOooooooooo..." The phone plopped into the water. America frowned and said in his normal voice, "Well that was anticlimactic. Such a passionate scene, too."

America whistled and then started walking down the street to the Mobile-T™ Store. America headed inside and got an older model with some of the money he brought along with, immediately putting into the phone the one and only contact he memorized by heart beforehand: Rei's. It may sound excessive, but America's always been excessive, so deal with it. It kinda saddened America that he no longer had his family's contacts, but America knew that if they called him, his heart wouldn't be able to handle it. He has to do this without distractions, he has to live his life how he wants to live it.

He has to.

As America sat outside the store on a bench while getting rained on, he started planning out what he would do for the last few weeks of his life. He started putting things he's always wanted to do on the notes app. His end-of-life bucket list, essentially. 1, meet Rei. 2, go to a beach. 3, go to a theme park. 4, have real food. 5, fall in love. America originally put that one down jokingly, but America found that he meant it. But that's stupid- you can't fall in love in four

weeks. 6, go to the moon. Another impossibility, but America wished that he could nonetheless. 7, learn how to swim. 8, sing in front of an audience. 9, dance in front of others. 10, make new friends. 11, watch the sunset from the bridge. 12, go on a Ferris wheel at night. 13, travel the world. Yeah, no, America was too broke for that. 14, go to a party. 15, go to a real school. That one was also impossible considering the last day of school was... what? In a few days? Yeah, that isn't happening. It was still fun to wish, though. 16, be free. America smiled and already checked that one off. 17, try alcohol. America wasn't anywhere near his own country's drinking age, but it's now or never, I guess. 18, have a lot of fun with Rei. 19, finish all the letters and hide them in the right spots and 20, be with someone who cares when death finally comes knocking.

With that addition, America found that he didn't want to add any more. Number twenty seemed frighteningly *final*- as if boom, this is the end of it all. But America didn't want it to be the end. Clenching his phone, America added a 21: Live. America knew it was impossible, but he hoped it would be true. He hoped he could live long enough to truly experience all those things instead of a dumb speed run of it all. The things he listed didn't even scratch the surface of what America wanted to do, but America knew that realistically he didn't have time to do them all, so he'd just have to settle for this dumb combination of impossibilities and dreams.

America begrudgingly got up and started heading towards the beach. Might as well start crossing his checklist off now, eh?

But as America was walking, he saw something beautiful.

Sunglasses at a convenience store.

I know what you might be saying- cheap, plastic sunglasses, beautiful? Yes. Precisely. In America's eyes, they were ridiculously cool. He wanted them. No, he *needed* them. Quickly, America added a 22 to his bucket list: get sunglasses. With a giddy smile and plenty of giggles, America hopped into the store, snatched the sunglasses off od their rack, and got them for 50 cents.

America smiled and slipped the sunglasses on. With an even

brighter and giddy smile, he checked off number 22. One down, 20 more to go.

... America was way too childish for this.

--x--

When Russia logged on that night, he hadn't expected Cosmos to be offline. Cosmos was never offline at this time. Never.

At first, Russia was confused, expecting Cosmos to log in at any moment, waiting patiently for the tiny chime of someone coming online.

But the chime never came, and that's when worry started settling in. Russia was left wondering what the heck happened, and why Cosmos wasn't there. Russia was terrified- Heck, Russia didn't even know he could be so scared. At least, he hadn't been so scared in a while. The last time Russia was so scared was when...

When... Actually, Russia would rather not think of that...

Russia sighed shakily and got up. Everything is fine, he's just overreacting. Russia only had three days left of school, he isn't going to let this run the home stretch of the school year. Plus, Cosmos is probably just busy, he probably got caught up in a family problem... Hopefully.

Russia begrudgingly studied for finals and, when he was done, headed downstairs to eat with the little rascals (his family). Luckily, his siblings didn't notice his worry. Russia had always been good at hiding his emotions, after all. When they finished eating, Russia had to force his siblings to clean up, which is always fun. And by fun, I mean that someone usually starts complaining and makes an even greater mess that Russia has to clean up. This time it was Ukraine who refused to help. Ukraine stood up from his dinner chair, flipped Russia off, and then went to his room without another word. Russia gave Ukraine a bothered look as he walked away, but if Ukraine noticed it, he didn't care.

With the tiring day over, Russia went to bed, his thoughts always

wandering back to worrying if Cosmos was ok.

After the fifth time of thinking about Cosmos in ten minutes, Russia thought, *'I need help. I need serious, serious help. He's stuck in my head. I'll murder him tomorrow, I swear-'* And so on.

At some point in Russia's rambling, Russia fell asleep.

--x--

Russia practically bolted home. He, Ukraine, and a few of his siblings had gone to the mall in the early morning. Russia had looked away for one second and turned around to see his brother Ukraine talking to Canada looking like a lovesick child. After a few moments of shock, Ukraine had turned and seen Russia. Ukraine looked mortified and Russia laughed in the suddenness of it. In one split second, Ukraine suddenly looked *furious*. So, Russia did the only sane thing he could do in that situation and ran away from his raging brother for the sake of his own goddamn life.

Russia rushed inside his room and locked the door shut. Like Russia was in a horror movie, he heard the front door creep open and Ukraine's menacing footsteps. Once Ukraine was right outside Russia's door, he stayed frighteningly silent until saying, "I'm not mad at you, but what did you hear?"

Russia didn't grace the question with an answer. After a few seconds, Ukraine sighed, making Russia feel like the younger one of the two. Russia gulped. Yeah, this really felt like a horror movie, even though Ukraine said he wasn't mad. Russia heard quiet laughter on the other side of the door. It sounded like Bela, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Oh, they're all ganging up on him now. Russia reckoned it was time to turn the tables, fast. Russia smirked, even though he knew no one could see him, "I saw you crushing hard on the Canadian~"

Ukraine sputtered on the other side of the door like a dying tractor. Russia had to hold back his laughter as he heard Bela say, "Ooooo, you've been caught, Raine!" followed by a series of fits and giggles from Bela, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

"S-shut up!" Ukraine said, obviously flustered. Ukraine suddenly sounded sad, "It's obvious he'll never see me as anything more than a friend, though."

"Hey, don't say that," Russia said, leaning back against the door.

"Yeah, you never know until you try, Raine! " Russia heard Bela say. Russia really wanted to shout out 'great encouragement, Bela!' but he kept his mouth shut for the sake of the wholesome moment they must be having on the other side of the door. Russia felt a smile dwell on his face. Ever since their father died a few years ago, things were really looking up for all of them. They were young and kind of weak, sure, but this was so much better than the drunken abuse from their father. Their father was often more concerned with wars and his work than he ever was with feeding and taking care of his children. Even though it sounds cruel, when their father, well, *died*, they got all of his money and actually started paying for things that their father should've paid for. Things like food, new clothes, and toys (plus a computer for Russia, but that wasn't really necessary). Even though Russia didn't accept his father's death at first, he could see how much happier it made his younger siblings, so Russia was happy as well.

Leaving his siblings to cheer up Ukraine (since they're better at cheering him up than Russia ever will be), Russia finally checked the chatroom. Cosmos was offline. Last time online: two days ago. Russia sighed and leaned back on his chair. What happened to Cosmos? How long would it take for Cosmos to come back online?

And, why did his heart hurt at the prospect that, maybe, Cosmos may never come back online at all?

It's a stretch, sure, but Russia couldn't help but think of the worst. Russia didn't know how much he cared about Cosmos until Cosmos wasn't there like he usually was. And, it had only been two days since Cosmos was last online. How long had he cared this much about Cosmos and never realized it?

He couldn't have feelings for his online friend, could he? Russia wasn't gay; at least, he didn't think so. He had always just assumed himself straight, which, now that Russia thinks about it, is probably

a belief ingrained into him by his father. Russia didn't know what to think. Maybe he should ask Ukraine about it. Ukraine does have a crush on Canada, after all.

Russia debated internally on the idea for a while before getting up and heading towards Ukraine's room. But before Russia knocked on the door, he hesitated. He wasn't so sure he wanted to ask anymore. His feelings confused him, sure, but Russia wanted to figure it out on his own. He didn't need help.

His mind 100% decided, Russia turned and went back to his room, determined to figure out his own feelings alone.

Just like everything else he does.

--x--

Later that day, Russia could just tell something was wrong. He could feel it in the air. He wasn't sure if it was his brotherly senses or not, but he had a feeling something big had just happened under his nose.

CRASH!

Ah, there it is. With a sigh, Russia got up and headed downstairs towards the source of the sound. Russia saw most of his siblings gathered just outside the living room, Kazakhstan keeping them under control to the best of his abilities. Russia noticed immediately that Ukraine wasn't there and that a small vase had fallen to the floor near where everyone was huddled. Someone must've accidentally knocked it over while trying to get a better look into the living room. Russia immediately took control of the situation. "Hey, you little rascals, scatter before I make you clean the dishes and sweep the kitchen without my help tonight!" That got Russia's siblings' attention. Almost immediately, Russia siblings scattered while saying something about Canada. Ah, so that's why. Ukraine and Canada are talking, probably didn't want interruptions, but everyone kept interrupting anyway so they enlisted Kaz to keep everyone out. Or something like that. Speaking of which, Kaz looked very relieved now that he no longer had everyone practically crawling over him to get a better view.

"You think I could go inside?" Russia asked Kaz.

Kaz looked unsure, "I guess, but I warn you, Canada's probably still crying."

"Crying? Canada? Why?" Russia raised an eyebrow questioningly and Kaz shrugged, "Find out for yourself if you must." Kaz glanced behind him for a second and hesitantly walked away from the living room now that he had no one to keep from entering.

Russia entered the living room and immediately noticed a hunched-over, crying Canada and Ukraine trying to comfort him. Ukraine noticed Russia's confusion and shrugged, conveying that he didn't know why Canada was crying either. Russia sat down on a nearby chair and, after a few moments of awkward silence, Canada's sniffles went quiet.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know where else to go." It took Russia a few moments, but then he finally realized it was Canada who said that. He kind of sounded like a beat-up puppy. Ukraine kept on rubbing his back.

Russia felt so much pity for Canada as he replied, "No, it's fine. Why are you crying?"

Canada sniffled one last time before sitting up straight and looking Russia in the eyes, "Yesterday, me and my family were supposed to visit my brother but-"

"Aussie? Why would you need to visit him?" Ukraine interrupted, sounding confused. As soon as he realized he said that aloud, Ukraine's eyes widened and he looked away, "Sorry, continue."

Canada smiled, "No, it's fine. I shouldn't expect you two to know."

Russia tilted his head, "Know what?"

"I actually have two brothers and one sister. You guys know about Aussie and Kiwi, but I have an older brother who's lived in the hospital for seven years, which is why you don't know him."

Russia nodded, gesturing for Canada to continue his story.

"We were supposed to meet him and hang out with him yesterday, but we had to cancel those plans because my mom and dad got stuck at work. I got really mad about it, but I don't have my license yet, so I couldn't drive there by myself. I was even madder because we had something planned for today in advance and we were going to tell my brother our plans on Friday, but we didn't have the chance to. So basically, we ghosted him. Today, we were told-" Canada's voice cracked and tears started forming on his cheeks again. He quickly wiped the tears away, "Sorry."

"No, take your time, it's okay," Ukraine said softly.

Canada took a deep breath in, calming himself, before continuing. "We were told earlier today that he ran away. They searched for him everywhere, but all there was were two letters he left in the hospital. One was left in his room, while another was sent to another patient his age. I think his name was Antarctica? I'm not sure... The letter left in his room was basically him- h-him saying goodbye to us. Apparently his condition got worse and he didn't see the point in staying in the hospital for the rest of his l-life." Canada sobbed, "A-according to doctors he only has four weeks left to live a-and- and I got really, really mad when I found this out. I had just come back from the mall when I was told the news by my parents. I y-yelled at my mom and dad about how if we had just *visited* him on Friday he wouldn't have run away. I just kept on yelling and yelling, I was so mad. I saw how sad my parents were and yet I didn't stop. I was just so *angry* at everything!" Canada clenched his fists, breathing hard. After a few moments he sighed and slumped down, "So, after I had blown off my steam, I felt really bad and just... ran. Before I knew it, my feet had led me here."

Russia was about to try and comfort the poor Canadian before he locked eyes with Ukraine. It suddenly dawned on Russia that even though he had heard the story, it wasn't really his place to try and comfort Canada. They had never been that close, anyway. With a small sigh, Russia got up and slightly pat Canada on the shoulder, "Well, stay here for as long as you like, though the younger ones will probably come and trample you eventually."

Canada nodded, still looking at the floor. Russia whispered to Ukraine, "Comfort the poor man up, will you?" Ukraine nodded

before Russia walked out of the room. Russia trusted Ukraine to help his own crush.

Russia plopped down on his bed with a grunt. Today had been just a bit too crazy, and it was only the afternoon. Before Russia knew it, he drifted off into his thoughts and, after getting up to send Canada off and eat dinner with his family, stumbled back into his room to drift into the land of dreams.

Day Two

America walked down the town's streets in the morning light. America had slept in a tree that night and even though that sounds like something he shouldn't be doing due to his condition, did America care? Hell no. He can and will sleep in trees if he truly wants to... which he doesn't anymore. It was fun, sure, but it was not worth America being so sore due to the awkward position.

America had to wait in town for the next few days. He had to wait for someone to arrive. It wouldn't be that long now. America would give it..... Four days. After those four days, America will just have to leave this town. America hoped that wouldn't happen. He didn't want to be alone.

For now, he would just look around town so that he could brainstorm stuff to do. The town seemed small, surrounded by a lot of untamed forests on one side and a beach on the other. According to some locals, there were a few bigger towns nearby that had things like amusement parks, public pools, and other various things. While walking, America noticed a really cheap motel, a small old-fashioned arcade, a forest with a few hiking trails, a beach, and... a playground?! America hadn't gone to a playground in forever! America giggled and jumped around, the childish part of him taking over. Oh, he is *so* going on the swings. No one can stop him now.

America practically ran into the playground, scaring the younger kids already there. He spotted the swings, apologized to the kids he terrified, and ran over to the swings, wheezing and laughing in pure, childish joy. America started swinging back and forth, reminding himself of how much he loved the swings when he was young. He was suddenly transported back to a much simpler time, a time when the entire world was in front of him, waiting to be explored.

Like watching a movie, fond memories of playing in a playground much similar to this one started playing in America's head. America could practically see himself on the teeter-totter with Canada,

shouting in pure joy. America could see himself chasing his brother, and his brother chasing him back in what looked to be a game of tag.

America's eyes widened and he stopped swinging. The younger version of himself that had been playing tag with Canada suddenly fell roughly onto the mulch, coughing up a storm. Oh, no... America knew what was happening and even though he longed to look away, his eyes felt frozen in place.

A younger Canada quickly rushed over, and America could see the worry on his face. Canada started yelling something, but young America couldn't make out what he was saying, only coughing harder. America saw his mom and dad run over, his mother looking downright terrified as she held her child in her arms. America could see her shouting and crying, but it sounded like he was listening through water. All he could hear were her desperate cries for someone to help her baby, that something terribly wrong was happening, that she didn't want her son to die. America saw a terrified Britain hastily fumble for his phone and call an ambulance. Meanwhile, the younger America was only coughing harder, his heart starting to go haywire. America could only watch as his younger self collapsed, limp, into his mother's arms, his eyes fluttering closed. He could vaguely hear his mother scream in pure sorrow and terror. With that, the past memory faded away, leaving America clammy, hyperventilating, and terrified. America clutched his shirt in the area where his heart was supposed to be. America could feel its erratic beating through the shirt's fabric and hear the pumping of his own blood pounding throughout his brain.

That was the incident when he was ten. Why did he remember it now? Why did the moment he lost his only chance to be a semi-normal kid haunt him? Why did it haunt him even though he finally had the freedom he's longed for for so long? America felt bitter anger start coursing through his veins. That day was the day his dreams were shattered and dumped in the garbage for the sake of America's "survival." America stood up from the swing, suddenly wanting to leave. He didn't care where he went, he just wanted to get away. America spat on the floor spitefully and started walking away, only one thought in his mind, '*Screw you, heart failure.*'

The world turned into an angry blur around him, and America started walking on the nearby hiking trails. Even though he found himself hungry for breakfast, America didn't stop. He didn't want to. He didn't want to let his mind catch up to him. He just wanted to be left alone in his anger for a moment.

But at some point, America stopped, his anger spent, leaving a dull ache in his heart behind. America sighed and turned back to go back into the town, only to realize that he was lost. All alone.

In the forest, of all places.

America looked to the forest floor, hoping to find a hiking trail obvious on the ground, only to see tufts of grass and scattered leaves. No trail whatsoever. America was actually lost. An idea popped in America's mind as he pulled out his phone. He can just call for help or go on google maps or something...

Dang it, no service.

Theoretically, America *could* call 911; buuuuuuuuuuuut, that would also mean that they'd realize he's UK's missing kid and *bloop*, there goes America's freedom down the drain. So, yeah, America's not gonna call 911 any time soon, he'll figure something else out. America started trying to retrace his steps, which was honestly going horribly because he didn't know *where the frick he is*. But, y'know, let's try it anyway!

But just as America convinced himself that he wasn't going in circles because he had just found a hill and was going up it, he tripped, tumbling down said hill and rolling into a bush near the bottom.

America *hurt.* Not to mention, his heart was going crazy again like, yeah, we all know you can't handle any sort of physical stress so shut *up,* Becca.

Groaning, America hauled himself back onto his feet, looking around. He was lucky he hadn't hit his head on anything or else America would really be in trouble right now. But as America looked around, he saw one of the most beautiful things he's ever

seen. It was a beautiful sight, straight out of a movie. There was a clearing with a tranquil pond in the center, fish darting around in the water. The water was crystal clear, and there was a stream flowing into a patch of less dense forest. America walked closer to the pond, mesmerized by its existence. America widely smiled to himself. This clearing was so beautiful and prettier than everything he's ever seen. He could spend hours here watching the fish dart around playfully and never care about the time.

Not like the fish had to care about time themselves. They could do whatever they wanted in their own little world. America felt a pang of jealousy and laughed at himself. He was jealous of *fish*. But why wouldn't he be? Their lives were so simple. They were perfectly content staying in that little pond while America always dreamed higher. Heck, America wanted to go the highest height possible- he wanted to go to space! But even if the fish weren't content with their little lives, they could simply swim downstream towards other seas. Other opportunities, other worlds. America didn't have time to explore the world like they did.

With a sigh, America laid down on the grass to watch the sky above. America found his eyes widening as he saw a majestic eagle- he's pretty sure this eagle was a bald eagle from all the pictures he's seen online- swoop down and gracefully catch another bird with its talons. America had already changed his mind as he saw the bald eagle proudly fly away with its catch. Screw being a fish, America wanted to be a bald eagle! It looked cool, it was probably the freest of the free- what with the power of flight and all- and, if it truly wanted to, it could reach the stars.

America longingly held his hand up to the sky, reaching for its starry heights. Even though America couldn't see the stars right now, America knew they were there, just waiting to shine through the sun's overwhelming light. America would give anything to be able to fly up there. He'd give anything to be free, go to space, and experience everything the universe has to offer.

Even so, America smiled. Despite all his dreams, he could be happy down here on the ground. He could be content here, just watching nature be awesome. America exhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

But that's when America heard a rustle coming from a nearby bush. America's eyes flew open and he scrambled up to his feet, ready to face any sort of danger. America waited tensely as the bush rustled more. Suddenly, a dog ran out of the bushes, leaping straight for America. America yelped as the German shepherd tackled him to the ground, licking all over his face. America heard someone shouting in German, and the dog jumped off America, its ears perked and its tail wagging like crazy as another country ran into the clearing. Now that the dog wasn't on America anymore, America took the opportunity to sit up.

The country that entered the clearing after the dog was shorter than America, with glasses situated on his face. His flag was black, red, and yellow. He shouted once more in german, and the dog obediently trotted over to his legs. His gaze suddenly fell on America and his expression turned to one of surprise and embarrassment. He fumbled with his jacket before saying, "I'm sorry that my dog jumped on you."

America paused for a moment before bursting out into laughter, startling the poor German. America laughed some more, before coughing roughly. Now that America's body was acting up, America forced himself to stop laughing.

"Is something wrong?" The other country asked.

America shook his head, "Nothing's wrong, and there's no need to be sorry. I thought I'd have to face a wolf or something and instead, I got tackled by your dog, which is a giant upgrade, mind you." America stood up, cleaning some of the dirt clinging onto his jeans, "Plus, you have a pretty adorable dog. I love him already."

The other country smiled awkwardly, "My dog is a she, and her name is Schatzie."

"Aww, that's adorable! That means sweetheart or something, right?"

The other country looked surprised, "You know German?"

America pinched two fingers so that they had a little space in between them, "Just a little bit. Oh! My name's America, by the

way."

The other country smiled and held his arm out for America to shake, "My name is Germany."

America smiled and immediately shook Germany's hand, "Nice to meetcha Germany!"

Germany gave America a confused smile, "You too...?"

America smiled widely and immediately squatted down to Schatzie's height, squeezing her face affectionately and cooing like he would to a baby. Germany smiled and sat down next to the pond, "You really like dogs, huh?"

"I love every dog on the face of the Earth and never underestimate that," America replied, a little too serious.

Germany laughed again and tried starting small talk, "How old are you? I'm 17."

America gasped excitedly and plopped himself down next to Germany, "I am too!"

Germany glanced at America, confused, "How come I've never seen you before at school? You seem like the type of country that would be hard to miss."

Frick. America should think before he speaks. America quickly thought up the best lie he could use, "I've been homeschooled all my life."

Germany looked at America, interested, "Really? I didn't know you could get homeschooled."

America smiled, playing along with his own lie, "Not many people know that's an option available."

Germany nodded, "So, why are you out here anyway? I thought only me and Schatzie knew about this clearing," Germany affectionately petted his dog, making sure to scratch behind her ears. The dog barked happily and her tail wagged contentedly.

America rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly embarrassed, "Well, uh, I may or may not have gotten lost, fell down a hill, and ended up here."

Germany had to cover his mouth with his hand so that he wouldn't laugh, "Are you serious?"

"Yes. Very. Please help me."

Germany silently chuckled, "I can show you how to get out-"

But then a loud grumble interrupted him and America immediately felt embarrassed. It was his stomach. Man, it really wasn't a good idea trying to skimp out on breakfast.

Germany smiled knowingly, reaching into his bag and pulling out a plastic box with two half sandwiches, "Maybe you should eat first, okay?" America nodded and Germany grabbed one half, gesturing for America to take it. Hesitantly, America grabbed it, but he didn't eat it, feeling guilty for eating someone else's food. Meanwhile, Germany was about to happily take a second bite of his half of the sandwich, only pausing to look at America, who hadn't eaten a single bite.

Germany joked, "I hope you aren't thinking I poisoned it."

America snorted, "Are you sure it isn't poisoned?"

"I don't know, you might just have to test that out for yourself."

America looked at Germany, "Are you sure it's okay that I'm eating your food?"

"Yes, now eat."

America nodded and practically devoured his sandwich in one bite. Germany stared at him, surprised. America noticed Germany's stare and smiled smugly, "What? Intimidated by my power?"

Germany shook his head, "No, you just reminded me of someone for a moment."

America gasped, "A potential rival?! Tell me!"

"Maybe later."

"No! Tell me nowwww!" America jumped up, laughing, causing Germany to stand up too, slightly confused. Within seconds, America screamed a battle cry and started chasing Germany, shouting something along the lines of, "Tell me your secreeeeeeeeeets!"

After what seemed to be hours of messing around and talking, Germany noticed the sun starting to set and nudged America with a smile, "I think it's time to go."

America looked at the sunset and nodded. Together, they walked out of the forest, America talking up a storm. Once they were finally in the town, America smiled brightly, "Thanks, Germany! It was nice talking to you- wait!" Germany raised an eyebrow at America's sudden outburst, letting America continue his train of thought without any interruptions. "Let's swap contacts!"

Germany smiled. Why not? America was a breath of childish fresh air. Heck, he had a feeling that America and Slovakia, a friend of his from school, would be chaotically good friends. They were both incredibly cheerful, though America was much more outspoken. Actually, wait, Germany wasn't sure which one would talk the others ear off first, "My phone number is xxxxxxxx."

America smiled, putting Germany's number into his phone. America then looked at Germany and said, "Mine is.... Wait, gimme a sec," Germany laughed a little bit and watched as America checked his own phone number. "Okay, Mine is xxxxxxxxx!" Germany put the number into his phone.

"Bye, Amerika," Germany waved, starting to walk away with his dog.

"Bye, Germany! Bye, Schatzie!" America emphatically waved the two off, watching them walk away until he couldn't see them anymore. America smiled and heard his belly grumble again. It *was* about time for dinner, after all. America looked into his backpack.

Yeah, he definitely had the money. He had thousands of dollars in gift money that he'd been saving for years, probably more. He could easily live in a cheap motel and eat cheap small-town diner food for a month without any financial worries. In fact, cheap small-town diner food sounded really amazing right about now.

America smiled to himself, joy filling him up to the brim. Today had been amazing. America found himself asking what tomorrow might bring. He couldn't wait to experience more that this beautiful world had to offer. America shoved the thought that he was running out of days away. If he was sad, he'd lose his happiness. No, he would be happy. He still had so much time left.

America smiled widely, hopped on the balls of his feet, and gazed at the sunset longingly before turning around and dashing into town towards the diner, for once not caring about anything other than the sound of his feet hitting the pavement.

Man, America couldn't wait for tomorrow.

Day Three

Canada couldn't sit still in his seat. It was the class right before lunch, for one. Not only that, but Canada couldn't help but worry about his brother. His brother had run away on Friday, and it was Monday now. He hadn't been found yet and it was killing Canada. Every day America spent in the outside world was another day lost that could be spent getting him a working heart. They would've figured something out, they always do. But they can't figure anything out without America actually being there. It was killing Canada.

When the bell finally rung, Canada jumped out of his seat, practically leaping towards his locker. He grabbed his lunchbox, closed his locker, and headed towards lunch. Canada sat down in his seat, but he didn't necessarily feel like eating. He was far too worried. Ukraine sat down next to him and gave him a concerned look, "Hey, Canada? Are you okay?"

Canada turned to Ukraine and forced his lips into a smile. He was going to say something along the lines of, "Of course I am!" But, for some reason, Canada didn't feel right lying about this. He sighed and replied, "No, I'm... I'm not." Once Canada finally brought himself to say that, the rest came spilling out, "I just... I'm worried about my older brother. We had a team search for him all afternoon yesterday, and they came up with absolutely nothing. I don't know what to do I just- I don't want him to die."

Canada felt tears start to prick his eyes and quickly forced his emotions down. He couldn't cry here, not at school where everyone was watching. Out of nowhere, Ukraine grabbed Canada's hand and yanked him over to the bathroom. Canada was confused, but let the smaller country drag him. Once they were in the bathroom, Ukraine turned to Canada, "No one can see you cry here. It's okay to cry." Canada smiled at Ukraine and the smaller continued speaking, "If you're really that worried, then go check for yourself. Even if you don't find him, you can at least some closure in the fact that you

tried, right?"

Canada immediately brightened up. Why didn't he think of that before? That's a great idea! "Thank you so much, that's an amazing idea! I'll get everything ready today so that I can search for him tomorrow!" Hope sparkled in Canada's eyes and he hugged Ukraine out of nowhere, "I know I've already said this, but thanks for the idea, you're the best friend I've ever had."

Ukraine smiled and hugged Canada back, pretending as though the friendzone didn't hurt him, "N-no problem, Canada."

Canada turned back to his food, newly inspired. He *could* find his brother.

No, Canada *will* find his older brother and save him...

Before it's too late.

--x--

America watched the waves crash on the sand before him. Throughout the day he stopped at the playground a little bit to pay respects to his younger self, but for the rest of the day, he played and messed around at the beach with a few kids whose school had released early for summer. He even managed to play frisbee with them, which was fun until America repeatedly threw the frisbee into the water and had to admit to the others that he couldn't swim. Now, America was seated on a rock, watching the people play in front of him and watching the sun slowly set in the distance. He twirled a pencil in his fingers, as he had been writing on a piece of paper just a few moments before. With a small smile, America signed off on the letter. Letter number 3 completed. Thinking about what the letter was for made America frown a little bit, but he'd be fine. He had already planned out the general area of where every letter would go but didn't know the specifics until this letter. He had finally fully planned out where every letter would go and when he would write each letter; so in the end, this would be the hardest letter to find.

Oops.

America folded the piece of paper and put it in an envelope with the number "3" written on it, quickly sealing it. America looked around the rock he was sitting on and slid the envelope into a convenient slot between two rocks. It was high enough on the rocks to keep the envelope dry during high tide, but it was also in a good enough hiding spot that unless you were looking for a letter on a beach, you wouldn't find it. He had already written the directions for letter four inside. He would write letter four tomorrow.

For now, America contentedly watched the waves crash upon the sand and watched giggling kids play in the water, some of their parents watching them and others swimming right by their side.

Maybe, once upon a time, he could've been those kids. If he had been normal, he might've been able to do a lot of stuff he never could before. Maybe... maybe he would've been happier. America hid his backpack in the patch of rocks and took off his shoes, shirt, and socks. No better time than the present, eh?

America's gonna play in that water and no one can stop him.

Day Four

Canada walked onto the bus heading towards Lydia, the town America's hospital was by. This bus was on the only route that actually dropped people off in that town, which was surprising to Canada at first. It wasn't as surprising now. Canada had been looking out the window only to see small towns separated by what seemed to be miles upon miles of forest. No wonder this was the only bus route heading towards the town- this area is so sparsely populated. Apparently, there were some bigger towns west of here, but there weren't any big cities other than Pangea, which was honestly farther away than what it looks.

Canada would've driven here, but he didn't legally have his license yet. In fact, he would get his license in a month. Canada frowned. If he didn't find America quickly, America may not even be alive to see that day come. Canada felt tears once again prick at his eyes and quickly wiped them away. He had to stay strong. If he didn't, who would?

If Canada found America, he just knew they could find a heart in four weeks. It was plenty of time! They had always worked things out before, they would do the same now. That is, if America was actually there with them. But every day America is out messing around is a day lost trying to get him a heart.

Before Canada knew it, he arrived at the town. Canada hopped off of the bus, making sure to thank the bus driver. His mom taught him manners for a reason, and Canada will use them. Canada looked around at Lydia. It was surrounded by a very large forest (part of it having been turned into small nature trails); however, there was an opening in the forest eastward that showed the sparkling sea. According to what Canada knew, Lydia was located on a peninsula, so the larger, westward towns also had beaches. But even so, America must be here. He had to be. They didn't find him on Sunday, but just look at the forest, they obviously wouldn't check it fully, it's way too large. So, America must've been in the

forest when the search team went out here.

Actually, is it possible that he could still be in the forest? Canada felt worry creep up on him. Not sure if you can already tell, but Canada often acted like the eldest sibling. He's always worrying over his siblings and is very protective of them, even America. He's been protective of them for as long as he could remember. Due to America's heart illness, Canada had to do all the brotherly things America couldn't do. Basically, Canada stood up to the role of "older" brother like a champ. Even now, he's much more mature than America. Not like America was ever mature in the first place. He's always acted childish for his age, even though you'd expect the opposite due to his heart.

Though Canada knows why he's so childish. Canada can understand. America was forced to grow up and learn the reality of his situation too soon. In a way, his childishness is only there because he didn't want to grow up, and he still doesn't. Canada could still vividly remember talking to his brother about it. It was the only time Canada had seen him so serious and... so, so sad.

~~-~~

America and Canada were playing pokemon trading cards. America always liked to play them because he always won against his brother. Canada would get really sour when he lost while America would jump up, childish declaring his victory and rubbing it in Canada's face. They were playing again and, as expected, America won. America jumped up from his hospital bed, already acting smug about his victory. There America went again, acting like a little kid who had finally won against someone older than them after years of losing over and over and over again. Canada had the strange urge to tackle him.

"How come you always act like a little kid?!" An annoyed fourteen-year-old Canada asked.

America looked down at Canada, who was laying down on America's hospital bed, exasperated and annoyed to no end. At this point, Canada still hadn't had his ridiculous growth spurt. America gave Canada a tight smile, his smug smile and victory dance gone in seconds. Now that got Canada's attention. His brother never looked so... serious. It kind of

scared Canada. America opened his mouth to speak, "I guess... I don't wanna grow up."

"That's silly, no one takes you seriously as a kid!" Canada scoffed, trying to cover up the fact that America's uncharacteristic expression worried him way too much. Not only that, but America's logic made no sense! Who would want to be a kid? No takes you seriously if you are one or act like one. No one.

America smiled sadly, "Maybe, but... because of my heart, I don't know if I'll ever live to be 18 anyway. Even though I know it's stupid and impossible but... I want to be a kid forever because I want to live long enough to do everything, you know? Not only that but... kids don't have to worry about death. They don't have to worry about not being able to wake up tomorrow and I- ... They just have fun and smile. I want to do that, too. I want to get that innocent obliviousness back..." America trailed off, avoiding looking into his little brother's eyes. Canada didn't know America felt that way. Canada wished America had told him sooner. Canada reached for America's hand in an attempt to comfort his older brother; but before Canada could, his brother shook himself out of his trance, slapping his own cheeks lightly. After doing that, America brightened out of nowhere, pretending that he hadn't been sad at all, "So if you ask me, kids are pretty awesome!"

Canada didn't have the courage to ask America if he wanted to talk about it, simply moving on. Even though they never addressed what America said again, it still stuck with Canada after all these years.

Maybe he should've asked.

~~-~~

Canada frowned. He's gonna prove what America said wrong. Heck, America's gonna live to be 18 if Canada has anything to say about it and won't need to act like a little kid. Call it hope, call it brotherly rivalry, it doesn't matter. Canada's gonna make it so that America lives to 18. No, he's gonna live to 80 if Canada has anything to say about it.

Canada started looking around town for America, determination coursing through his veins. At some point, Canada even started

using pictures on his phone to ask people about America. All he got was sad smiles and the shaking of heads. Either that, or people ignored him completely, which was very rude of them to do (according to Canada). After what felt like hours of searching, Canada's phone died. But, Canada didn't give up. He couldn't give up. Not now, when he knew he was so close to an answer. He just knew it.

In the corner of Canada's vision, he saw a familiar flash of red, white, and blue. Canada's heart leaped in shock and joy. America?! Canada quickly turned around, only to see sunglasses getting lost in a crowd. America! He saw America! That must've been him! He ran over to where he thought he saw his brother and noticed he was standing in front of an old-fashioned American-style diner. The coincidence would've made him laugh if he wasn't so caught up in trying to find his brother.

Canada hesitantly entered the diner, his eyes immediately scanning the room. After a few seconds of looking, he only found an apparent lack of a country named America. Confused and slightly disheartened, Canada went up to the counter where a lady was looking at her orders with a toothpick in her mouth. He quickly got the waitress's attention and asked, "Ummm, do you know someone named America?" The waitress shook her head. Canada frowned, "He's a little bit shorter than me, has fifty stars, has red and white stripes?"

The lady frowned sympathetically, taking out her toothpick to speak, "Nah, I don't think I've seen him 'round. He might've come at some point, but I only work weekdays here. Sorry, hon." She cast Canada one more sympathetic glance, before returning to her work.

Canada's heart dropped. America wasn't here? Canada could've sworn he saw his brother right in front of the diner. Canada ran outside the diner, his head jerking this way and that in a desperate attempt to find America. Was his mind tricking him? Did he wish to see America so bad that he saw America there even though it was nothing?!

Canada felt defeated. He was so dumb. Of course America wasn't here. He had probably already moved onto the next town. He was

always talking about traveling the world someday, after all. Canada should've known better. He's so dumb.

With his heart sinking lower and lower, Canada walked over to the bus stop, waiting until the bus arrived. When the bus finally came, Canada didn't even say hi to the driver or anything. He just sat down, defeated, his mind and mouth awfully silent.

How could he find his brother now? It's impossible to find America among all those towns. Canada needed help....

And, actually, Canada might know exactly where to get it.

--x--

OH.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap.

America ran inside of the diner as fast as he could, immediately ducking inside the boys' bathroom. Was that who America thought it was?

America was just casually heading back into town to eat after a great day of defeating little kids at arcade games, laughing at them because he's a pathetic loser with no life, and reading at the small public library, only to look behind him for one second and see Canada down the street. They even shared eye contact for a good half-second! FRICK, America's so dead and screwed and dead and it's over for him, it's been a great run, mate-

They'll send him back to the hospital, he'll let down his only best friend, and he'll lose all his freedom. Not to mention, if he gets caught, then all his dreams will go squat, dead, gone, rip, K.O., A three stock in smash, EVERYTHING.

America started hyperventilating. He's done for. Everything will fall apart. His plans, his hopes, his bucket list, everything! Again...

Canada's such a good child and brother that he would drag America back immediately. America felt his thoughts linger on that. Would Canada drag him home? And America doesn't mean the hospital because that barely qualifies as an apartment, but would he be dragged back to his real home, the place he was raised in? Would all his old stuff from when he was ten still be there in his room, catching dust? Would all his action figures still be there, or have the little buggers already claimed them as their own? America didn't know. America wasn't sure he wanted to know anymore. He was afraid that the room would be empty, just as forgotten as him in the hospital.

America slowly calmed himself down and gathered enough courage to peek outside of the bathroom. Canada was gone. America let go of a breath he didn't know he was holding, heading towards a counter stool. He watched a different employee from this morning come up to him. Yesterday, there was a community dinner potluck on the beach America was all too eager to join. Thus, he hadn't seen this employee before. The waitress gave him a good look before asking, "Are ya America?"

"Uhhhh, yyyyes?"

"Huh," The waitress put a hand on her hips, "another kid came looking for ya."

America started playing the oblivious card, "Really? What did he look like?"

"He was a little taller than you, had a white and red flag with a red leaf or something in the center," The waitress gestured along with her words, it was actually pretty entertaining to watch.

"Ohhh, I know him. I lent him something a few days ago and he was probably just trying to find me so that he could give it back," America lied without even thinking. It wasn't a believable lie by any means, but it would hopefully keep the waitress from asking any questions. Honestly, it didn't matter what she said at this point, America had made up his mind.

He would wait until sunset tomorrow, but if *he* doesn't arrive,

America will leave and never look back. He would do anything for his freedom, after all.

Even if it pained his heart so, so much.

--x--

"You don't understand!" Canada cried, "We can find him, I know it! We need to search the nearby towns while he's still probably in the area!"

"Mon bébé... **(My baby...)**" France weakly said, looking close to tears. "We searched there, he wasn't there. I know that America running away has been tough for you- it's been tough for all of us- but-"

"But what?" Canada interrupted, anger boiling out of him just like it had on Saturday. "You wouldn't understand, you aren't even taking what I'm saying seriously! He's still in that area, I know it!"

"Canada!" Britain shouted, silencing Canada with a harsh look. Britain sighed and went up to his taller son, putting his hand sympathetically on Canada's shoulder, "I know you're distressed about this, but we've already transferred the responsibilities of his search over to UN. There's nothing we can do that wouldn't be obstructing UN's search at this point."

"What- why?!" Canada exclaimed. Britain pursed his lips, somehow managing to hold eye contact with his enraged son. Britain's reaction was all Canada needed to know the answer to that question. They were too busy with work. They're *always* too busy with work. Canada felt anger spill out of him as he clenched his hands into fists.

"Well," Canada spit out, glaring at his parents with the power of a thousand burning suns, "I'm *not* going to give up on my older brother like you two have."

"Canada-" France started, but Canada was already heading upstairs, anger pounding through him. He didn't want to hear their excuses, he just wanted his brother back.

He *won't* ever give up on his brother.

...He can't afford to.

Day Five

It was Wednesday. Not just any ordinary Wednesday, though. This Wednesday had an exciting feeling buzzing through the air. Students were sitting in their seats reading books, spacing out, or struggling to finish their finals on time.

You see, this was the final day of hell called school- or at least, that's what they all say. The clock ticked. The students held their breaths and...

RRRING!

With the final ringing of the school bell that signaled the start of summer, Russia jumped up from his seat and raced to his locker, grabbing his backpack and racing off of school grounds, leaving his three younger siblings also in highschool, Ukraine (He's a sophomore), Belarus (also a sophomore, though she certainly doesn't act like it) and Kaz (a freshman), behind. Ukraine, after doing basically the same thing as Russia, started chasing after his older brother. Belarus simply laughed at their antics while Kaz looked mildly worried.

"RUSSIA! STOP RUNNING YOU LITTLE ФУК! **(Fuck)**" Ukraine yelled out after Russia.

Russia simply laughed, running faster towards his house. Russia saw his house slowly getting closer and yelled, "YOU SHOULD'VE PARTICIPATED IN GYM CLASS, UKRAINE!"

And with that, Russia burst inside his own house, whooping and hollering with excitement and joy. Russia smirked as he turned around to see his defeated and angry brother. Ukraine entered the house, more than a little bit peeved, and shoved Russia. Russia laughed and simply held an open hand out, "A bet's a bet, Ukraine. Now, hand it over."

Ukraine's response was a series of incoherent grumbles before he

stuffed a hand into his pocket, pulling out a 200 hryvnia dollar, and handing it over to Russia. Ukraine grumbled a bit before muttering, "Always remember that I *hate* you."

Russia chuckled, putting the dollar in his pocket, "Of course, of course."

Ukraine huffed one more time before heading upstairs to his room. Russia decided to go to his room as well. Entering his own room with an air of freedom, Russia sat down at his desk chair, a smile on his face. Summer was finally here! Beaches, ice cream, no responsibility, no school, and, most importantly, more time to play various video games with Cosmos! Speaking of, Russia cast a glance at his computer. Cosmos still hasn't shown up their chat for the past few days. Russia would be lying if he said he wasn't worried sick. Russia opened up his computer and pulled up their chat.

Cosmos: Last online five days ago.

What had happened? Why wasn't he playing? Where was he? Everything had been normal one moment, and then the next, Cosmos was just... gone. Russia didn't know what had happened, and that terrified him. He had no way of making sure his friend was okay, and it was killing him. Not only that, but if Cosmos was still out there- which Russia desperately hoped he was- Russia really wanted him to come back online soon because... well, he missed that idiot's laugh.

Before Russia could think too much about the pang of worry and wistfulness that suddenly overwhelmed him, he heard the front door open and heard Kaz holler, "Russ, Ukie, we're home free!" He also heard the light giggling of his little sister, Belarus.

Russia almost facepalmed. Oh my god, that's what felt missing. He had left his younger siblings in the dust. Russia quickly rushed downstairs, noticing Ukraine not far behind. He got to the bottom of the stairs and apologized, "Sorry for leaving you behind."

Belarus smiled, "It's fine. What was up with that race anyway?"

Ukraine sighed, "I had bet Russia that I could get home first."

Belarus snorted and giggled, looking away. She didn't need to ask to know who won, "Good job, Ukraine. You just bet against the most physically active person we know *on a race*. Sometimes I really don't understand your stupidity," She smiled smugly, and Ukraine shot her a glare.

Kaz held back a laugh and said something about grabbing the mail and going outside. Russia watched as Belarus and Ukraine kept on arguing about the bet, laughing along with Belarus whenever she got Ukraine into a corner. Russia could see the anger on Ukraine's face and it was wonderful.

Russia turned at the sound of the door opening, quickly catching a stack of letters aimed straight for his face. His siblings, however, didn't have so much luck. Ukraine got hit harshly in the face, while Belarus had the mind to duck, the envelopes crashing into the kitchen counter behind her.

The thrower of mail, Kaz, stood at the door with a shit-eating grin on his face. After a few moments, however, the shit-eating grin was quickly replaced by a look of fear. Russia turned to see Ukraine with a look of pure, unbridled rage on his face. It was the mail that broke the camel's back. Belarus said the 11 words of pure wisdom, "Kaz, it might be a good idea to run right now."

Kaz quickly took that advice, sprinting up to his room and yelping as Ukraine chased after him, a look of murder on his face. Bela chuckled before waving goodbye to Russia and following them so that she could see a good show. Russia smiled at that and proceeded to go upstairs to his own room. He sat down in his desk chair, looking through his mail. Most of it was university letters, which was absolutely crazy to Russia. It was insane to think of uni, even though he was a junior. Though, to be honest, there was only one true option here: UN's great big university. Not only was it run by UN himself, but it was also specifically made for countryhumans like Russia.

Russia turned back to his letters, he was about to throw them all away when he found a small letter at the very bottom addressed to someone named "Rei."

Russia felt confusion flow through him. His username? Why would anyone send a letter to his userna-

Russia's eyes widened.

Cosmos.

Cosmos would send a letter to his username.

Russia immediately ripped open the envelope, vaguely noticing how the envelope had a giant "1" scrawled over it. He immediately gripped the letter inside, reading it like it was some sort of holy book sent by Keanu Reeves.

Russia could feel his hands shaking as he read it. Cosmos had basically dropped off the grid, and this letter will probably describe the reason why. Not only that, but the only person online that Russia had ever told his address to was Cosmos and- to be honest- it was kind of a joke. But leave to Cosmos to take someone completely serious 100% percent of the time.

This letter would reveal everything, and it would prove to Russia that Cosmos was okay. That Cosmos wasn't dead at the bottom of a ditch somewhere. That they would play games again, and go back to the way things were: Russia playing as a paladin and Cosmos doing some weird, irrelevant magic spells in the corner while Russia is yelling at him to "please aim at the fricking dragon AND STOP MESSING AROUND-"

The letter was English. Messy English, to be specific. Honestly, the penmanship was scribbly and pretty terrible, but Russia could read it. When you have to teach your five-year-old siblings how to read and write, you get pretty used to awful chicken-scratch. Russia took a deep breath in, and finally read the letter for real.

Hey, Rei!

I don't know where to start...

I mean, I know you may still be in school right now, but I thought we could maybe meet in person? I know I've kinda dropped off the face of the planet recently, but don't worry about me! I'm fine, I just took a

quick trip to Mars, is all.

Either way, I thought it would be amazing if we met in person AND had a summer trip together straight afterwards! No rules, no parents, just you and I on a journey of fRiEnDsHiP. We could just hang out and have fun and have ice cream and chill out on beaches and ransack amusement parks and so much more! We could have so much fun together, I'm practically bursting with ideas! Plus, as someone who doesn't travel much, you could take me to all the coolest places ever! You'll be my personal guide to everything fun! (I'm suddenly realizing that this sounds a lot better for me than it does for you... oops.)

I'm gonna be in Lydia for a few days so if you want to go on this trip with me (let's be real here tho, you have to come, I'm not giving you a choice in this- I WILL FIND YOU AND FORCE YOU TO COME-), then just head over to the Lydia bridge at sunset.

Oh, and don't forget to bring your stuff, you big oaf!

-Cosmos.

With just a simple few paragraphs, Russia felt all the tension he didn't even know existed melt away. God, this letter sounded like Cosmos at 10 pm after they defeated a few goblins and Cosmos is already hyped up to defeat the goblin king even though they had barely defeated a few goblins because the devs had accidentally made them too op after a game update.

As Russia read it again, he couldn't help but smile to himself. He didn't have a choice, did he? No, he didn't. Plus, he had always wanted to meet Cosmos in person... he always wanted to meet his best friend in person. Also, he has an entire summer break to waste. Wasting it with the most fun person Russia has ever met sounded like the absolute best idea ever.

... Wasting it with the person that makes Russia's heart pound with joy was the best way to waste it.

Not to mention, him not being at home meant that Ukraine had to take charge and take care of all their siblings. Seeing Ukraine's face when he comes back from his trip with Cosmos is the best gift

anyone could ever give him.

With an excited smile on his face, Russia quickly packed up his stuff in an old backpack he had stuffed into the back of his closet. He packed at least a week's worth of clothes, various toiletries, his phone, his charger, earbuds, a ton of money, his credit card, and some various extra items.

Russia hefted his backpack over his shoulder before he had the mind to search for transportation to Lydia. He put down his backpack and went on his computer. After a few seconds of searching, Russia found one bus route that stopped a few blocks away from his house before heading to Lydia. The bus ride from here to Lydia was about 45 minutes, which wasn't too bad, while the bus departed from the stop at 7:15, which would mean Russia would end up at Lydia almost exactly at sunset. Since he had so much time to burn, Russia proceeded to search up more on Lydia and, eventually, he started playing the various weird steam games in his library. Russia glanced at the time to see it was 6. Almost time for dinner. Russia smirked.

Luckily for him, he wasn't the one who had to set up dinners from this minute onward. Russia grabbed his backpack and walked over to Ukraine's room, barging in without a knock. Ukraine's eyes immediately shot up, a peeved look on his face. Belarus and Kaz were also in the room, it looked like they had invaded Ukraine's room and haven't left yet to bother him.

Ukraine growled, "What do you want?"

Russia smirked, already imagining Ukraine's face, "I'm going to go on a trip with a friend for a week or so."

Surprise flashed across Ukraine's face, "Wait, what?"

"Aaaaand I'm leaving you in charge."

"WAIT, WHAT?!"

Russia felt his grin go from ear to ear, "Have fun~"

Belarus looked up from her phone, giggling. Kaz looked curious and

entertained.

Fury was back in Ukraine's face. Oh, how Russia loved how worked up Ukraine could it. Russia's ultimate pleasure came from messing with his siblings. Ukraine yelled, "YOU BITC-"

Russia quickly slammed the door on Ukraine, a shit-eating grin on his face. Before Ukraine could catch him, Russia started bolting for the door, barely managing to get out before Ukraine chased him down the stairs. Even after he was out of the house, though, Russia just kept on laughing and running, loving how free he felt running away from his worries for an entire week, running away with Cosmos for an entire week.

Russia loved thinking about it- just him and Cosmos, an entire week of fun. An entire week of them together, laughing and smiling. It was something he never knew he wanted so badly until it was shown to him.

Russia ran to the nearest local restaurant, ordering some food. But even as he ate his food, he couldn't stop his mind from wandering away to what he and Cosmos might do. Before Russia knew it, he was smiling like a lovesick idiot.

Oh, god. Why was he feeling this way? Surely friends aren't this excited about road trips or... are they? Russia wouldn't know, this was his first road trip. But, he had this feeling he shouldn't be so giddy and excited about this. He shouldn't be so happy thinking about him and Cosmos on the beach or getting ice cream or sharing ice cream- okay, wait, no- *sharing* ice cream?! Where did that come from. Russia felt his cheeks burn and quickly started drinking water, hoping that it would magically erase the heat on his cheeks and the thumping in his chest.

Could he have feelings for Cosmos? He could've sworn he's heard of people with crushes feeling the same as him right now. Did he have a crush of Cosmos?! No, no, no, no way. No, he doesn't. There's no way he does. He doesn't. Cosmos is just a friend. Just. A. Friend. Plus, Cosmos would never, ever feel that way about him.

For an unexplainable reason, Russia felt his heart ache at the

thought. Trying to distract himself, Russia went on his phone, only to feel his heart leap into his chest. It was 7, oh god. Russia immediately paid for his food, grabbed his backpack, and raced out the door, running towards the bus stop, guided by his trusty phone. Luckily for him, he raced on the bus the minute before it was about to leave, paying the bus driver, clambering onto the backseat, and huffing all the while.

Russia watched as the suburban houses of his neighborhood faded away to fields and then fields to trees. Lots and lots of trees. Just as Russia was 100% sure they had driven into the middle of pure wilderness, a small town suddenly sprung up. Russia watched the small houses fade back into trees and then back to small houses and then back to trees and then back to...

--x--

Russia jerked awake only to see he was still on the bus. He jerked about, panic filling him. Did he miss his stop?! Where were they?!

"And, the final stop of the day, Lydia!" The bus driver called out from the front of the bus. What the heck is that coincidence? Breathing a sigh of relief, Russia got up from his seat and shuffled off the bus. Russia's feet hit the sidewalk with a solid tap. Russia turned to watch the bus happily drive away and then turned back to the town before him.

By no means was Lydia a large town, but it was definitely much larger than the various towns the bus had passed. There was what looked to be a town square with a diner, motel, old-fashioned arcade, a boardwalk by the sea, a grocery store, a phone store, an appliance store, a bakery, a restaurant, and a variety of other shops. Closer to the outskirts of the town square was where the houses began. Some were two or even three-storied, but a good majority seemed to be quaint, one-story homes. On the outskirts of the town, there were forests, parks, hiking trails, one small playground, and a more modern road leading up a hill. There was a sign to the left of that road that read "Lydia Private Hospital."

Not only was there all that, but cutting the town in half was a small river that led out into the sea, cutting into the boardwalk and

beaches. Smiling, Russia walked into the town and straight to the bridge situated over the rough river waters. As he got closer, he noticed someone sitting on one of the benches that faced the seemingly endless- and darkening- sea. Russia felt excitement buzzing through him- that figure just had to be Cosmos.

Even though nervousness and anxiety started creeping up on Russia, Russia still kept on walking steadily towards the figure. Russia glanced west to see the sun dipping below the tree line, casting a warm orange glow on the figure's back. Blue and... red? White, maybe? Russia couldn't see the specifics of what Cosmos looked like, but it was clear that Cosmos was a countryhuman. Russia mentally sighed in relief as his heart soared. Relationships between humans and countryhumans usually got complicated quickly. But, wait... if Cosmos was a countryhuman, then shouldn't Russia know him? Basically every countryhuman went to the same school. But, who the heck is this countryhuman? Russia could swear on his life he's never seen him before at school-

Wait a second- Russia mentally backtracked a bit. Relationships between humans and countryhumans? Did Russia seriously just think of *relationships*? No, no, that's not right- Why the heck would he think of that? Russia stopped walking, his face starting to burn. What the heck was wrong with him?! This was the second time today! Surely he doesn't-

Russia forced himself to calm down, already making excuses for his word choice. Eventually, he mentally came to a good enough excuse- that by "relationships" he meant the friendship kind of relationships. Yep, that's it. That must've been what he had meant. Russia forced the burning sensation away and steeled his nerves, starting to walk towards Cosmos again.

Russia walked ever closer to Cosmos, his feet tapping against the concrete pavement and, as he got closer, the wood of the bridge. Eventually, he got so close that Cosmos turned at the sound.

Their eyes met.

Russia found himself admiring the soft blueness of Cosmos's eyes. If Russia could, he would stare at them forever and never be bored.

Oh god, not this again, that's really gay- Russia pushed his thoughts away just as Cosmos's face broke into a nervous smile, which admittedly caused a new torrential wave of unwelcome thoughts. Cosmos- or, at least, Russia thought this person was Cosmos. But let's be real here, how could it *not* be Cosmos?- stood up, facing Russia as his fingers fiddled with a pair of sunglasses in his hands. Russia smiled back at his shorter friend, amazed by the fact that he was actually physically *seeing* Cosmos right now.

Russia forced his unwilling mouth to move despite the butterflies fluttering around in his chest.

"Hey, Cosmos."

Cosmos's nervous smile immediately melted into an enormous, warming smile that caused Russia's face to burn, "Hey, Rei."

With those two words, joy sprang up in Russia's heart. This was actually Cosmos. He was actually physically here with his best friend. This was Cosmos. Russia felt himself grinning and he chuckled, looking down at Cosmos, "I didn't expect you to be so short."

One of Cosmos's eyebrows shot up and he bluntly responded, "Well, I didn't expect you to be a redwood tree, but here we are," Russia snorted and Cosmos continued speaking, "Also, for the record, I am *not* short."

"Whatever makes you happy."

Cosmos pouted a little bit before smiling widely and holding out his hand, "My real name's America, but you can call me Ame."

Russia played along, shaking America's hand, "Mine is Russia." If it was even possible, America's smile widened and, like an excited child, he yanked Russia over to the bench and forced the taller to sit on the bench.

America proceeded to sit down himself, practically jumping in his seat and causing Russia's face to burn a beetroot red. He turned to Russia, somehow not seeing how red the other's face was, and

excitedly said, "I can't believe this is real. That we're actually here, together, talking in person. To each other."

Russia chuckled at America's actions and responded, a warm feeling in his chest, "Same here."

"What should we do first? There are so many things to do..." And as Russia continued to listen to America's endless, excited ramblings, he noticed how the burning in his face, for once, failed to recede, no matter how hard he tried to make it. But... maybe it wasn't so bad. Seeing Cosmos's excited and childish face felt worth it. Cosmos felt worth it.

Russia only felt his face burn more and his heart race at that simple thought. It was true, though. That smile on Cosmos's face was so worth it.

Russia felt a warm feeling surround him that he had never felt before and he boldly put his hand on top of America's. America was startled out of his rambling and his gaze was ripped from the ocean to look at Russia in surprise. Russia felt his face burn even more. Why had he done that? That was so dumb!

But just as Russia was about to tear his hand away, America simply gave Russia an awkward and amazingly cute smile that literally lit his heart ablaze. After a moment of silence, America returned to his adorable ramblings as if nothing had happened.

Russia looked down at his left hand which was now on top of America's. Just looking at their hands together felt so *right* and it definitely didn't feel wrong as Russia had previously thought it would. Russia didn't want to let go.

Russia looked at the sea, a new sort of contentment settling in his heart. And, with a smaller blush this time, he admitted to himself that he wished he could be trapped in this moment forever.

He smiled.

Maybe... Maybe he *did* have a *tiny* crush on Cosmos.

And, maybe that wasn't as bad as he had previously thought.

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I'm so sorry it took me a month and a half to update!

I had been making drafts and deleting drafts for over a month before I hit a really bad creative rut- no matter what I did, I wasn't happy with this chapter.

So, I finally kicked myself in the butt and found the inspo to make this and god I finally love this chapter.

I also promise there won't be any more month-long breaks, this was just a really hard chapter to get out for some odd reason.

-Selva
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Day Six

Russia woke up to the incessant crinkling of paper. He groaned, not wanting to wake up, but finding that he was too awake to fall back asleep. Tired and slightly agitated from being woken up, Russia sat up to see America on his own bed, messing with maps and papers.

"What are you doing?" Russia asked. America jumped, startled, and proceeded to fall off of his bed in the direction away from Russia, sending the papers that were in his hands flying on top of him. Russia chuckled at the reaction.

America's head popped out from behind the bed, "Oh, morning, Russia. I'm just planning out what we're gonna do today!" America said, quickly picking up the map and papers he had dropped

Russia raised an eyebrow, "Why do we have to do that? We have a whole summer to waste."

"Exactly!" America said, bursting with excitement, "We have to make the most of it!" America showed Russia the map of Lydia, "We have to do everything fun!"

Russia gave America an *are-you-serious* look, getting up from his comfy spot on the bed to gently lower the map, "Why don't we just have fun with it? No planning, just doing whatever we feel like doing whenever we feel like doing it." He smiled, gently grabbing the map and folding it up.

America immediately became confused, "No... planning?"

"Precisely."

America looked down at the map, feeling himself fidget. He had always planned for stuff... planned things out so he could take his medication on time, planning things out so he could do the things he wanted to do without there being any complications... But Russia was right, wasn't he? He didn't need to plan anymore. He, as the

idiot he was, forgot to bring his medication so he didn't have to plan for that, and he wasn't couped up in a hospital where every moment of his life had to be monitored.

Maybe... Maybe America should change that. Maybe he shouldn't plan and just have fun, like what Russia said.

America looked up at Russia, "So... what do you want to do?"

Russia smiled, "I saw a really cool beach yesterday, do you want to go to it and swim?"

America gulped. He hadn't told Russia he couldn't swim yet, had he? But, before he could object, America looked at Russia's happy face. No plans, right? Well, he certainly didn't think he would swim today, or ever, but...

Plans be damned.

--x--

America had led them to the same beach he was a few days ago, with the giant rocks hugging the boardwalk walls and the soft, expanive, pale-yellow sand that lay at the beachside. When Russia had realized America didn't have swim trunks, he dragged them both to a clothes shop and got America some.

Now, they were here, the waves scaring America to no end. Russia, looking pretty excited, was already wading into the water while America sat there, terrified. But he must've been pretty good at hiding that fact because Russia yelled for America to join him in the water.

America gulped and, before he could think about how bad of an idea this is, starting wading into the water. America was starting to feel pretty confident about his abilities to wade in the water when the seafloor below him *dropped*.

Any normal person with beginner swimming abilities would've been able to swim backwards, back to where their feet could touch; but, I must remind you that, one, America is not a normal person and, two, America has *zero* swimming capabilities.

Which is a pretty dangerous combination when you're swimming *in the ocean*

The minute his head ducked under the salty water, America felt fear consume him. America panicked and closed his mouth and eyes in fear, desperately flailing his limbs to get above the surface of the water. But, with his eyes closed, he didn't know where up was anymore. Theoretically, he could've stayed still and waited for gravity to drag him down so that he knew where down was, but America, in his terrified state, was flinging his limbs around too much to let gravity properly take its course. Not to mention, America started spinning around in the water. To try and get a grasp of what was happening around him, America hesitantly opened his eyes, only for him to immediately close them shut again due to the painful saltiness of the water.

The longer America flailed under the waves, the more he panicked, starting to feel a burn in his chest that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Oh, great. He was running out of air.

After a few moments more of flailing around, America felt something plush at his feet as he kicked out... it was sand! Feeling a spring of hope, America kicked off of the sand, hoping he would surface if the sand was under his feet. To his luck, he did surface, gulping in a breath of air and opening his eyes; but, remember, he still doesn't know how to swim, and he slipped under the surface of the water once again.

America's lungs quickly started to burn again as he tried to swim upwards, his throat itching with a coughing fit that America couldn't afford to have. Just as desperation was truly starting to set in, America felt someone pull him up over the surface of the water. The minute he was above the surface, America gasped for air, coughing and wheezing.

America opened his eyes to see a very worried and terrified Russia holding him above the waves. Now that he was safe, America felt relief flood him, coughing and wheezing due to the exertion of, well, *almost drowning.* A sideways glance at the threatening waves, however, brought back America's earlier panic and America clung to Russia in fear of slipping underneath the waves once again.

Russia wrapped his arms around the poor, panicking American, "Hey, I got you, you're okay. You're okay." Russia said, trying to console both himself and the shaking American in his arms. What had just happened there? Couldn't America-

America clung to Russia tighter, closing his eyes. Russia felt himself become more panicked and worried, and his grip on America unconsciously grew tighter. Still worried, he asked, "What happened back there? Did you hurt yourself?" Russia started wading towards the beach, still insanely worried.

America's head suddenly fell onto Russia's shoulder, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

Russia's heart sank. America sounded like he was crying, "Hey, no, whatever it is, it isn't your fault, I promise."

"I just..." America balled his hands into fists, "I'm so sorry, I was supposed to make this fun for you, and I ruined it."

Free from the water, Russia gently put America down on the sand and grabbed the smaller's chin, sitting down next to him, "No, you haven't ruined anything, I promise. I just need to know what happened back there so that I can help."

America shook Russia off, holding his head guilty in his palms. Russia frowned. America sighed, "I've already ruined this day enough, haven't I?" With a dejected frown, America got up and headed over to the large rocks next to the boardwalk, climbing up one of them and curling into a small ball.

But don't think for a second their conversation was over. They were both one thing: frustratingly stubborn. Russia walked over to the rocks and, once he was there, kept on trying to get a look of America's face and trying to get America's attention. After all else failed, Russia sternly said, "Cosmos, look at me."

Russia heard a soft sniffle, and America pulled his head just the slightest bit out of his ball.

"America, I'm not mad or disappointed or anything, I'm just worried

and I want to make sure you're okay. I can't make sure that you aren't hurt if you refuse to tell me what happened." Russia softly said, looking at America with pleading and concerned eyes.

After a few moments of hesitation, America whispered an answer before curling back into his ball.

"What?" Russia asked, not hearing America.

America shot out of his ball and accidentally yelled, "I can't swim!" He quickly wiped his eyes with his arm, "I thought I could just learn on the spot because you looked so excited, but the minute I went under the water, I thought I was gonna die! I was so scared, and now I've ruined everything!" America's breath caught in his throat, and he shoved his head back into his curled up position.

Russia's eyes widened, everything made so much more sense now. But, Russia also felt guilt crash over him. In a way, this was his fault. Russia frowned. He hesitantly reached up for America, only to think, 'oh, fuck it,' and hug America, patting his back consolingly.

Russia quickly wiped away America's tears, despite America's quiet objections, and said, "None of this is your fault. But, you should've told me you couldn't swim. I don't want you to hurt yourself, especially not because of me. Never, ever, push yourself to do something because of me, I promise I'll never get mad."

"Promise?" America sniffled.

"Of course," Russia said softly, "I don't wanna have fun if you're not having fun too." Russia smiled, "Come on, let's do something we both enjoy." Russia gently grasped America's hand, his cheeks reddening the slightest bit, and led them both back to the motel.

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The red car swerved dramatically to the right as America turned the wheel, but luckily it didn't turn too far as to send the car flying as it raced down the city streets filled with the various assortment of racing cars. America grinned as he slammed down on the gas pedal and sped past various cars and cut into second place. His last

obstacle: Russia.

Luckily, America had saved up something Russia did not. When the finish line came into view, America slammed the button to his right labeled, "Nitro fuel," smirking as his car defied all the odds and sped forward, effectively cutting off Russia and claiming first place.

America whooped loudly, freeing his hands from the game's car wheel and flinging them upwards with a victorious and smug air. However, due to the excessive force in which he flung his arms up, America proceeded to fall off of the game's seat, laughing and wheezing all the while.

Russia, though disappointed in his loss, smirked at the American's reaction and got up from his own seat to look down on his friend, "Are you going to stay on the floor or should I take the win while you're immobile?"

At the prospect of losing, America shot upwards and stood up, pointing an accusing finger at Russia, "You can't steal my win, for I am the king of cars! Fear me, mere mortal!"

Russia snorted, "Whoever decided that? Plus, if you're the king of cars, then I'm the king of Galaga and Pac-man and Pinball and literally all of the old sniper games here."

America crossed his arms, agitation written all over his face at his previous losses, "You're only the king of all those games because you're a retro nerd and we all know it."

Russia smiled, "Fair point."

"How come you even know all those games anyway?" America asked, uncrossing his arms with a curious face. Well, someone got over their agitation quickly.

Unwilling to answer, Russia looked off to the side, "I..." America tilted his head a little bit and Russia sighed. He didn't want to hide things from America and his cute face, but he wasn't ready to answer that question, "I'll tell you someday, but I'd prefer not today. I'm just not..." Russia trailed off.

Finally grasping that the answer to his question would be loaded with sensitive topics, America's eyes widened and he frantically waved his hands around, "No, no, no, you don't have to tell me right now! I totally understand!"

Russia gave America a smile of gratitude and tried to push away the memories threatening to surface. It was the past, and it always will be. But even so, the memories refused to fade and Russia clenched and unclenched his hands.

He suddenly had a strange urge to play Repka.

Just as quickly as it crossed his mind, however, he pushed the thought back. No, not today. Russia will not wallow in his own self-pity today. He will not think back to a time that's never coming back. Never.

Trying to push away his dangerous thoughts, Russia smiled at America, "See? Wasn't all that so much better than almost drowning?"

America lightly punched Russia and Russia chuckled at the reaction. However, America didn't seem to be pouting. Instead, there was a soft smile on his face Russia didn't expect, "Yeah, it was. Thank you, Russ."

Russia felt his face heat up in milliseconds. America's smile along with the nickname was just too much for his poor heart, "R-Russ?" Russia questioned, accidentally stuttering.

"Yeah! I can't just call you Rei and Russia is too formal for me," America frowned a little bit, "Do you not like the nickname? I can change it if you want-"

"No, no, no, I love it, Ame, I promise!" Russia frantically interrupted, his heart twisting at America's dejected frown. The world just loved to play with his poor heart, doesn't it? Oh, wait, I'm the one who loves doing that. Huh.

America grinned his sudden nickname, "I love mine, too."

Russia looked away with a small blush, "I'm glad."

America started skipping towards the exit of the arcade, "Come on!" He beckoned, "Let's get dinner and then some sleep! We're going to leave Lydia tomorrow!"

"Wait, what?" Russia yelled out, quickly rushing after America, "Why wasn't I told about this?"

America shrugged with a shit-eating grin plastered all over his face before bursting out laughing and running off full-speed towards the diner. Russia growled, chasing America, "You little дерьмо **(Shit)**!"

America yelped in fear and ran faster, starting to laugh while he ran. As it turns out, laughing was contagious, and Russia started laughing, too.

With laughs and grins, they started racing each other back to the diner. At some point, Russia, seeing America struggling, scooped America up, startling the smaller. Though, after a few moments, America burst out laughing and raised his hand up in the air, happily ordering Russia to run faster and faster.

As laughter and joy echoed down the streets, many people turned to watch the happy duo and laugh at their silliness, bading the two goodnight or even saying various silly jokes and compliments. Though neither knew what the heck they were doing with their lives, America was happy. Russia was happy. And, America realized that maybe it's time to throw some of his silly plans out of the window.

Who needs plans when you can have fun instead?

--x--

Among the darkness of Russia and America's motel room, there was the sound of scuffling as a certain figure got his shoes on and snatched a map and a few pieces of paper laying about, shoving them into his pockets.

The figure left the room quietly, as to not disturb his sleeping friend, and trotted over to the beach. With the light of a dim boardwalk light guiding him, the figure scrambled up the rocks he

had been on before and, with shaking hands, pulled out the envelope he had hidden there a few days earlier. He opened up the envelope, took out the letter out, and proceeded to rip it up. That letter just wouldn't do anymore.

That dumb message couldn't ever explain the feelings he felt, and just writing a ton of emotionless, retrospective, depressing-as-frick letters would be just plain, well, depressing. If these letters were going to be his final messages to the world, they had to be cheerful, emotional, and sassy as frick. He had to go out with a bang, right?

Why not have some fun with it?

Ditch the stupid plans because guess what? He was not Britain. Throw the tea in the harbor, for frick's sake. With a devious smile on his face and a confident hand, he wrote out his message all over again.

After he finished the letter with a softer smile settling on his face, he put it back in its hiding spot among the rocks. Pulling out the map of Lydia he brought with him, he guessed his approximate location and marked it with a large dot with the number "2" right above it. He also took the liberty to add another dot over the arcade marked "3."

Quickly putting his map away and climbing down the rocks, he ran off to the arcade to repeat the same process with the letter he put there.

Well, that, and to get another map.

With what he's going to do, he's gonna need it.

Day Seven

Russia plopped down onto a bench, both tired and excited for what they were doing today. As per Russia's suggestion, they were heading towards Erith, a small town southwest of Lydia. Though it was fairly small (with only a little more than a thousand people) it was actually more well known because of the extensive forest reserve directly south of it called Rivermouth Forest Reserve. Due to its proximity and the fact that the northernmost parts of the reserve were known as the safest, the town was kept alive by the various hikers, campers, outdoors-enthusiasts, and families.

For the moment, however, Russia was sitting on Lydia's bus stop bench, waiting for the bus to arrive. When they asked the locals about any buses heading for Erith, most shrugged or gave them confused looks. But, after asking a ginger-haired girl with a bright green shirt, she happily- and immediately- replied that there was one bus route heading west that had a stop in Erith. Claiming that she was an avid hiker, she stated that it would arrive at 10 AM, and would stop at Erith at around 10:30. America and Russia thanked her, got breakfast, killed some time, and now, at 9:55 in the morning, were waiting for the bus to arrive.

While Russia was calm and collected on the bench, America kept jumping around, obviously excited. He was rambling on and on about how he'd never gone camping or properly hiking before. It made Russia smile. He wasn't planning on roughing it out and camping due to their limited savings, but just hearing America acting all excited about it brought Russia amusement and joy he couldn't explain.

He just... loved it when America was excited. And, though this was a new discovery, he found out that he loved it when America rambled too, and he wasn't sure why. Well, he had a guess as to why; but at the same time, he wasn't sure. Did a crush mean that he loved everything America did? Maybe? Russia wasn't sure. I mean, America could be annoying sometimes, especially when he starts

bothering Russia when Russia's trying to sleep, but even with those annoying moments, it didn't really change his positive opinion of America.

Hearing the slight rumble of an approaching engine, Russia got up, causing America to stop rambling and look curiously down the street. After a few seconds of seeing nothing but trees waving with the calm wind, a bus came into view. America grinned, gripping onto the straps of his backpack like an excited first grader. Russia couldn't help but smile at the sight.

The bus came to a stop in front of them with an irritating *screech* and Russia winced. America, however, didn't seem to care as he hopped onto the bus, paid his bus fare, and plopped down on a seat near the front of the bus. As expected of him, America stole the window seat, already excitedly looking out the window. Russia got on as well, paid his fare, and sat down next to America, chuckling at his excitement.

When they started moving, America, while still looking at the window, asked Russia, "So why do you want to go to Erith anyway?"

Russia shrugged, partially avoiding the question, "Hiking would be fun."

America gave Russia a small smile, lightly and playfully pushing him, "We both know that isn't the real reason. You were so insistent about it earlier, so I'll ask again, and you better answer for real this time! Why do you want to go to Erith?"

Russia chuckled, "Ok, you got me, you got me," Russia glanced over America's shoulder to look at the passing trees and thinning houses, "My dad used to take me and my siblings out camping at the Rivermouth Forest Reserve all the time. Whenever I asked about why, he would always grumble something about gaining 'survival skills' or something weird like that. Whatever the reason, it was fun, and I always looked forward to it, even if we only went twice each year. We actually went to the southern parts of the reserve each year; but north, south... same difference," While Russia was speaking, a small smile settled on his face as he thought back to

those fun trips. Sure, there was that one time where Russia's dad brought them there right before a really heavy snow, but it wasn't *that* bad. Plus, those trips helped Russia get used to colder temperatures.

America lit up, "Really? That's so cool! Do you still go camping here?"

Russia's smile fell as his thoughts drifted to... Actually, he'd rather not think of that cold winter day. He spoke, "We... We don't anymore, actually. A few years ago we stopped going because we had no real reason to anymore."

America frowned, disliking the sudden shift in mood, "Why are we going there now then?"

Russia exhaled and smiled sadly. *Him* being there or not shouldn't matter. Russia knows this. But... it *does* matter. It matters to everyone in their huge family. Honestly, going here- to the reserve- was just his way of looking back on the pain. Denying his pain was not the way to go about this, but embracing and moving past it is. If Russia's being honest, he never would've done this alone- he wasn't ready for that- but America just being there meant a lot. It's been years, but Russia still needs those scraps of closure. He isn't his siblings. He hasn't fully recovered- he never will, but going back to the reserve was one step closer to finding the closure he's yearned for for so many years. He knows it. He looked at America, "How about this, I'll tell you when we get there, ok? I just need to mentally prepare myself, you know?"

America raised his eyebrow before insisting, "You better stick to that!"

Russia smiled, "I will, I promise."

America's face softened and he smiled, saying a soft "Ok" as he glanced back at the window.

Smiling and knowing that the conversation was at its close, Russia leaned back in his bus chair. It was uncomfortable, sure, but he was tired. He might as well catch some sleep while he can, right?

~~-~~

The smell of cigarette smoke, a fire to the senses that causes a stinging in your eyes and lungs, filled a young Russia's nose. Russia's father was to his left, smoking a cigarette that hung from his mouth. Though no one talked about it, Russia's dad was a smoker. Russia didn't mind, however, he was used to the acrid smell of smoke lingering around the house and on his clothes.

Currently, they were in an arcade. Russia had never gone to one before and simply picked the most interesting and simple game, a shooter game called Sniper 2. Russia had seen his dad shoot plenty of times, so it couldn't be that *hard, right?*

Russia could feel the roughness of the arcade's fake gun in his hands, aiming towards his target. He couldn't move the fake gun much since it was connected to the machine, but he could move it just enough to shoot towards all the targets. The target, which in the shape of an apple surrounded by a circle, was brightly lit up, ripe for the taking. Russia paused for a split second, before pulling the trigger, the sound of the arcade machine's minimal gun sound effects filling his ears for a split second.

He looked at his target and growled. He missed! Hearing a soft chuckle to his left, Russia turned to see his father snuff out his cigarette and walk towards him. Russia backed up from the arcade machine the slightest bit, curious as to what his father was going to do. Then, Russia's father, the USSR himself grabbed the gun and, with his right hand, plopped his ushanka affectionately on Russia's bare head. He then, with both hands, aimed towards the target, saying, "Всегда помни, Россия, держи оба глаза на цели, выдыхай, а потом, не задумываясь, стреляй. ***(Always remember, Russia, keep both eyes on the target, exhale, and then, without hesitation, fire.)*** *"*

He pulled on the trigger, shooting down the target. He turned towards his son with a small smile, "Приходите, попробуйте еще раз. ***(Come, try again.)*** *"*

Russia quickly nodded, running up and aiming again for another target, his father helping him to aim and guiding him with slight nudges and tips. Russia exhaled, and pulled the trigger.

BANG!

~~-~~

Russia woke up to someone roughly shaking him by the shoulders. Opening his eyes to see a blurry America, Russia felt himself get shaken even more, "I'm up! What's wrong?"

"It's our stop, you big oaf!" America whined, trying to get Russia to move.

"Ok, ok!" Russia responded with a small laugh, "I'm getting up, I'm getting up!" Grabbing his stuff, Russia started heading off the bus, America on his heels.

They got off the bus and America instantly became excited, saying, "So where's the entrance to the forest?"

Russia looked at the small town before them and shrugged, "I don't know, I've never been to this town before. My family usually went into the forest through Mayseille, a town on the southeast edge of the forest. We can always ask the locals, though."

America nodded, about to run off when Russia held on to his hoodie, keeping him from running off. America cast Russia a confused look before asking, "What's up?"

Russia sighed, pointing to a nearby, local restaurant. It seemed to be the only one in town, "Food first, forest later."

"Didn't we already, you know, eat breakfast?"

"Yes," Russia responded, "But, it would be better to eat lunch now while we can and it would be better if we could get some sandwiches or something for dinner."

"That's..." America started, "actually really smart!" With a grin on his face, he went to go run towards the restaurant, completely forgetting that Russia still had a grip on his hoodie. But, he wasn't allowed to forget for long because he ran forward and proceeded to choke on his hoodie. Russia, a mixture of concerned and terrified, quickly let go of the hoodie, causing America to fall on the ground.

America blinked for a few seconds before looking up at Russia and bursting into laughter, causing the Russian to, after a few horrified moments, chuckle along with. America, unfazed and still giggling to himself, scrambled up to his feet, saying, "I suppose I kinda deserved that."

Russia chuckled, walking past America and patting him lightly on the back, "Come on, let's just eat."

America blinked a little bit at the pat before smiling, quickly catching up to Russia as they both walked towards the restaurant together.

--x--

Russia and America were in the depths of the woods, hiking up a good-sized hill. They both had bagged sandwiches in their backpacks, and they had been hiking for around an hour and a half. They hadn't really gone anywhere, however, as they had stopped frequently by America's various antics. AKA, America freaking out and overreacting to the tiniest of things. For example, just a few minutes ago they stopped walking because America found a roly-poly and stopped everything he was doing because he "saw it curl up into a ball like how does it *do* that it's so adorable!"

Russia didn't know how many times they had stopped at this point, but he couldn't say he cared all that much. America just looked so happy at every bug, bird, or weird thing he saw, and that made Russia happy, too.

"So, Russia?" America spoke up, casting a few curious glances at some peculiar, brightly colored flowers right next to the hiking trail.

"What is it?" Russia asked, partially expecting another roly-poly.

"You know how you mentioned that you used to go camping here?"

"Oh, yeah," Russia looked at America, "Do you want to know why I insisted on going here right now?"

America cast Russia a surprised look before looking back at the

trees and chuckling, "No, not that. I trust that you'll tell me when you're ready. I'm really just trying to say... let's go camping! Here, today, right now."

Russia smiled, chuckling, before bluntly responding, "No."

America whipped his head towards Russia, a look of pure betrayal on his face, "What? Come on, Russia! Why not?"

Russia sighed, "We can always camp together if you want to, but not right now- later. It isn't exactly a good idea to burn through what little money we have for this trip on camping supplies."

A frown settled on America's face. He didn't have time for 'later'... By then, He would probably be... you know what. "Can't we just buy some sleeping bags and rough it out?"

"That sounds like a great idea, America," Russia said, and America's face lit up. America was about to happily reply when Russia continued speaking, "if you're an idiot *or* a skilled camper. And, honestly, no offense, you look like you've only spent one night sleeping in a tree, claiming that you know how to camp and be outdoorsy while simultaneously not sleeping the entire night and skipping breakfast *and* dinner."

America gripped his shirt where his heart is, "*Ouch.* Words hurt, you know, words hurt. Plus, haven't you been seriously twice each year for who knows how many years? I know you can, so you can just teach me how to, too!"

Russia glanced at the trees around them, suddenly wary of what they might hold. Sure, this is the safest section of the forest, but that doesn't guarantee it's 100% safe. Russia couldn't risk it, he couldn't risk America getting hurt, "Yes, *I* have been seriously camping before, but that doesn't guarantee anything. You might get hurt by a wild animal... have you even seen a bear before in your life?"

"No..." America admitted, "But I'm sure I can handle myself! How dangerous can one night be?"

Russia groaned, "I just- you're not gonna let this go, are you?"

"Nope," America obnoxiously popped the "p," giving Russia a lopsided grin.

Russia sighed, caving, "*Fine,* but I'm doing all of the harder tasks and we are not wasting money on sleeping bags, ok?"

A wide smile flashed onto America's face and he hugged Russia from the side, causing the taller to blush the slightest little bit.

"Thank you, Russia."

Russia huffed before reluctantly hugging America back with one arm, "You're gonna be the death of me someday, you know?"

"I know."

--x--

After a few hours, they had found the perfect clearing for their "campsite." It was a small clearing at the top of a hill, right next to a small stream. Currently, Russia and America were separately looking for dry sticks, branches, and twigs to use as makeshift firewood.

Russia had already collected a large pile, which made him proud of himself. Deducing that he had collected enough for one night, Russia added the final stick to the pile, ready to go back to the clearing. Just as he was about to pick up the pile of various branches and sticks, however, Russia heard a familiar yelp echo through the trees. Russia felt his heart drop. America!

Instantly fearing the worst, Russia started rushing towards the source of the yelp, terrified that a wild animal might have attacked America.

...Only to see America whacking a raccoon over the head with a stick. America yelled out, whacking the raccoon with each word, "Give me back my food you thief!"

Russia wasn't sure whether to be embarrassed, disappointed, or

amused, "What the heck?"

Recognizing Russia's voice, America instantly turned to him, "Russia, the raccoon is trying to steal my sandwich!" With America's attention no longer on it, the raccoon took the chance to run away, the bag of food securely in its mouth. Noticing it trying to escape, America jumped and started chasing after it, yelling, "No! Come back here and gimme back my food!" Just as he finished his sentence, however, he tripped on a tree root, falling face-first into the dirt. The raccoon, now without its attacker chasing it, successfully ran away with its loot. Raccoon, 1; America, 0.

Russia, who was trying to hold in his laughter but miserably failing, remarked, "The great America, mage level 83, has been defeated by a raccoon. Lost items: Dinner and America's Dignity." In response, America let out a very loud and depressing groan. Russia, starting to pity him the slightest bit, walked up to America and helped him up to his feet.

America whined, sniffling, "Nooooo the fooooood, my lifeblood, It's goooooone...."

Russia snorted and smiled softly, starting to lead them back to their clearing, "Come on, it's okay, I'll share my sandwich with you."

Upon reaching the clearing, Russia said, "Ok, stay here while I go collect our branches. If you can, make a circle of rocks on some bare dirt. That's where the campfire will be."

America nodded, saying a quiet but determined, "ok," and Russia went back into the forest, collecting his and America's branches. When he came back to the clearing, there was a neat little circle of rocks near where America now sat, which was closer to the crest of the hill. Russia put down the sticks and grabbed the three sturdiest ones, arranging them in a teepee and adjusting them until they could stand on their own. Next, he grabbed a small pile of leaves and, reaching into his backpack, pulled out a lighter. With the lighter, he lit the leaf pile on fire and quickly moved the pile so that it was underneath the teepee. Finally, he grabbed some sticks of various sizes and put it next to the starting flame so that it could grow and last. America watched all this happen with amazement

sparkling in his eyes. He was also a little bit concerned at the fact that Russia just had a lighter on hand. Like... when would you ever realistically need that??

Satisfied with his work, Russia stood back up, "Ok, America, you're in charge of keeping the fire alive while I go grab myself some berries."

America shot him a confused look, "Wait, why are you grabbing berries?"

"I doubt a single sandwich will tie both of us over, so I'm going to grab some berries so that we can eat them as a side."

America nodded at Russia's answer, "Ok, oh, also?" Russia nodded, letting America continue. "How much survival stuff do you know anyway?"

Russia lightly laughed, "Well, a lot more than you, that's for sure."

America huffed, crossing his arms, "That's not a real answer!"

Russia smiled, "I know."

America blinked for a few seconds before he burst out into laughter, a large smile reappearing on his face, "Oh, shut up."

Russia felt his smile grow wider as he lightly waved goodbye, America waving back, and turned back towards the forest to collect berries.

--x--

After Russia collected all the berries, he came back to the clearing, sitting down and handing America some of the berries as America handed him half of the sandwich. As America nommed on his half of the sandwich, he commented, "You're really good at this stuff. Like, really good."

Russia smiled, putting another stick into the fire, "Well, I guess I can thank my dad for that. He was a little paranoid at times, but he was a good father," Russia frowned a little bit, murmuring quietly, "At

least, I think he was, I don't think my siblings would agree with me, though."

Not hearing the second bit, America glanced at Russia in the corner of his eye, an unsure look on his face, "Was?"

Russia fiddled with a berry that was between two of his fingers, sighing and nodding, "Yeah, was. On December 26 of my freshman year, he..." Russia's voice cracked, and he felt sorrow overwhelm him, "He passed away... We used to go out here every summer and winter but... that tradition died with him, along with so many others. With his death, we stopped doing things as a family. We're still family, but... it's not the same without him around. The reason I insisted on coming here is... I suppose I just couldn't bring myself to come here alone. I've wanted to find closure for so long, so I thought that maybe you could help me find it here... As silly as that sounds."

"Well, uh, did you find the closure you were hoping for?"

"I..." Russia frowned, "I don't know, if I'm being honest... but," Russia glanced at America, a small smile forming on his lips, "I do know this; even if I didn't find exactly what I wanted, I did something else just as important- I made good memories with you."

America smiled warmly, "Awww, Rei..."

And even though Russia felt his face go red at that warm and perfect smile, he didn't turn away this time. Instead, he found himself smiling shyly back. Seeing Russia smile back, America only smiled wider, putting down his food and pulling Russia into a comforting hug. America whispered, "I know we were just having a wholesome 'awww' moment but... always know that you can tell me these things. I know I act like a kid but... if you need me, I'll be there, I promise."

"It's the same with me," Russia responded, hugging America back with a dorky smile.

After a few moments, however, America parted from their hug, a little red in the face, murmuring something about finishing his food

before the thirty-second rule was up. And, even though Russia also went back to eating his own food as if nothing had happened, he couldn't help but think back to their small hug and tiny chat. Honestly, it probably meant nothing to America, but it meant so much so Russia's little gay heart.

Russia felt himself flush, *'Oh I'm so gay. I'm so, so gay. Dad would be soooo disappointed in me right now.'* Despite the mental comments, however, Russia couldn't help but feel those stupid, stubborn, persistent, wonderful butterflies that fluttered in his stomach. His entire upbringing had taught him that he shouldn't be feeling this way about a guy, but his heart couldn't help it. *He* couldn't help it, and he had no idea why.

He sighed and screamed at the same time internally, *'Ok, so I might have a little bit more than a small, teeny-tiny crush, this is fine. I'm fine. I can just... ughhhhhhh. I'm probably letting down dad so much right now.'*

While Russia was having this internal crisis of repeatedly guilt-tripping and admitting things to himself, America's gaze drifted off, eventually settling on the beautiful sunset. A small gasp escaped from his lips, "Wow... I've never seen a sunset like *that* before."

Yanked out of his mental torture, Russia blinked in confusion for a few seconds before looking at the sunset himself and weakly smiling. His gaze drifted towards America, who was very visibly amazed and ecstatic. He smiled warmly, looking straight at America as he spoke softly and slowly, "Yeah, it really is amazing, isn't it?"

America, oblivious to Russia's look and the true meaning behind his words, said wistfully, "Yeah, yeah it really is," His eyes were trained on the sunset, occasionally glancing to see the beautiful oranges and pinks that surrounded them, like magical fog about to transport them to a magical world. The sunset, to most people, would just look pretty; but to America, it was one of the most beautiful things in the world. The real thing could never compare to pictures or imitations made in video games. America sat in pure, wild wonder of the oranges and pinks that seemed to seep into each other and the world around them. America could've sworn he saw a few pinpricks of light from stars twinkling in the sky, but that might've

been his imagination. America could've sat there for hours, watching as the sun dipped lower and lower, and as the oranges and pinks shifted and changed along with it.

The two sat there, America looking at the sunset in pure wonder while Russia occasionally stole glances of America. Just seeing America so amazed and happy made Russia happy, too. Sure, he didn't understand what was so captivating about the sunset, but just one glance at the wondrous look on America's face made Russia want to learn.

But even as the sunset faded away, America's excitement didn't fade away with it. Instead, as the world grew darker and more mystical around them, America started directing his attention towards the stars, only growing more and more amazed with each passing second. When it became pitch-black around them, Russia and America laid down to view all of the stars at once, and America audibly gasped. The stars were so bright! The stars that shone around the hospital were never *this* bright, due to the light pollution caused by the hospital itself. They looked like amazing, little, glowing porcupines stumbling across the night sky, trying to find their way back to each other and to their homes. America would've died to take a picture so that he could study this view hours on end into the brightness of the morning. Screw sleep, this was *amazing*. Actually, wait, no, scratch that, America would *kill* for a telescope right about now. In this dark wilderness, America was able to spot all of the constellations he constantly saw and studied in pictures and books. Reading about them is one thing, but to say that you saw the *real thing* is another. Not before long, America started giddily pointing out each constellation with the excitement of a five-year-old to Russia, who listened intently and nodded along while smiling at America's excitement the entire time.

Eventually, after America was able to calm down just the slightest bit, America started speaking in a soft voice, as if he was afraid that any loud sounds would cause the stars to hide from him, "I suppose I should spill a secret of my own," With the light of the moon and the stars, Russia could faintly see America's happy smile, "You see, I've always loved the stars and space, and now that I can actually see them for myself it's... it's a dream come true. I don't know when

it first started, but as long as I can remember, I've loved them with a passion I'll never understand. Though I'll admit Niel Armstrong and pictures of space helped fuel my obsession with it, I'm never quite sure when it first started. So, honestly, I've probably just forgotten when it first started and how. But, no matter what, I want to go on the moon just like Niel Armstrong. I want to walk on it, and then, after that, I want to reach the stars and their planets. I want to go farther than any human or countryhuman has gone... There's nothing in the world I want to do more." America softly chuckled, "It's why my online alias is Cosmos, it's because of my love for the moon, the stars, and space in general."

Russia smiled to himself, "I'm sure you'll be able to go up there someday."

America went quiet, grimacing to himself. He opened his mouth, before silently shaking his head and closing it. He wasn't going to go up there, he knew it. He didn't have enough time... but he could never tell Russia that. He wasn't sure either of them had the heart to face it. Now that America knows about Russia's dad, he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't bring himself to tell Russia. Russia's obviously still grieving his dad, after all these years... telling him about America's condition... it wouldn't help anything... No, it would hurt him... America knew he couldn't say it so, instead of saying the direct truth, America said, "One way or another, I'm sure I will."

America found himself smiling while simultaneously fighting back tears. And yet, the smile plastered on his face felt so *fake*.

...Yeah, he'll go up there someday. One way or another, alive or not, he's going to reach the moon and beyond. America reached his hand into the night sky like he was trying to capture the entire universe in his grasp. Closing his fist, America felt one thought echo throughout his brain.

One way or another, he'll reach them.

...One way or another...

Russia turned to look at America, before looking back at the sky, "I

know you can do it, I just know you can."

"Yeah... " America weakly whispered, gripping the grass beneath him as he struggled to fight off the extreme sorrow that was about to overwhelm him as he looked up at the sky. Suddenly, they started looking more and more like the porcupines America always saw them as. Oh, wait, no, those are America's tears blurring everything. Keeping the emotion out of his voice, America continued speaking, "Yeah, me, too..."

But Russia had already fallen asleep, unable to hear the soft sniffles that America let out. America had never expected this to be so *hard.* And now that Russia had fallen asleep, away from America's grasp, sudden loneliness, sorrow, and loss crashed into America. Don't get him wrong, he didn't want to die. He was so scared of death. But where was he supposed to go? There was no miraculous heart donor coming- to believe that there was would be naive and foolish... A countryhuman's intact heart doesn't just fall from the sky...

And no matter where America looked, there was nothing going for him beyond these few weeks of fun. The only thing patiently waiting for him was death, that cruel, cruel reaper. In fact, America hated himself for doing all of this to himself and to Russia, but what else was he supposed to do? He didn't want to be so alone anymore...

America laughed through his tears. In the end, he was alone anyway, wasn't he? Because here he was, cold and alone in the isolated darkness of the forest, with only his beautiful, prickly, lost porcupines left to lead the way.

Day Eight

America groaned as they clambered onto the bus again for the second day in a row, sitting in the aisle seat as Russia sat down in the window seat. Putting his backpack on his lap to be more comfortable, America asked Russia, "So, uh, why are we going to Llyn again?"

Oh, yeah, you don't know what Llyn is, do you? Well, don't you worry your little head because America didn't either until five minutes ago. You see, five minutes ago, America did an amazing thing called pulling out his phone and searching it up on a handy dandy little thing called google. According to the website America stumbled upon, Llyn is a small town with a record-breaking amount of nicely paved roads: two.

The first nicely paved road is on the main street, while the other stretches about halfway across the lake on the most pristine lake properties you could think of. They range from cozy little cabins to what looks like full-on mansions. Basically, it would cost you an arm and a leg and probably one of your kidneys to live there. It all screams *rich*.

Even though the town is rich, it is still awfully small, boasting only about 700 people in its entirety. It has a small clothes shop on the main street, a small elementary school, a small beach, and a small restaurant as well as an outdoor diner that all the locals went to.

In fact, the town was so small and irrelevant you could go your entire life without hearing its name spoken once, even if you're only about a mile away. In fact, if you ever hear its name spoken out loud, it would probably be spoken from the lips of the bus driver that stops at the town twice a day for a maximum of three seconds.

Basically, it was an unheard-of and remote paradise.

But enough about the stupid town, why were they going there anyway? Heck, America never even looked at the small dot

representing the equally small town if not for Russia pointing to it on his map earlier and insisting that they go there. Speaking of the devil...

"What?" Russia nervously queried as America narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the Russian.

"Are you leading me into a trap? Or a bear? A bear trap?!" America guessed, looking increasingly more worried with each new guess he presented.

Russia laughed, nervously waving his hands about in a pitiful attempt to try and get America to calm down, "No! No, I'm not bringing you into a trap, a bear, or a bear trap, I promise."

America quickly became more worried, despite Russia's feeble attempts, "Then why are we going to a town that I had to search up on google *two times* to get a proper hit?"

Russia laughed even more, "Just be patient and trust me, okay?"

America frowned, his brows furrowing in relentless worry as his mind wandered back to bears once again. Giving up on protesting against Russia's plan for the day, he crossed his arms and leaned back with a small sigh, "You suck, you know."

Russia gave America a smile, "Yeah, I know."

After about thirty minutes of America's mind wandering back to the inevitable bear thought, the bus stopped with a loud, obnoxious, and irritating screech that ripped America from his thoughts like paper from a notebook. Upon hearing that *delightful* sound, America immediately hopped out of his seat and pulled on his backpack, making sure that the bus driver could see him stand up and prepare to get off. The bus driver, upon seeing America stand up and fuss with his backpack, grumbled in surprise as he opened the bus doors, letting America and Russia go free.

When the two hopped off, Russia was quick to start leading them towards the main street, which, from here, led to the lake. America, stealing a quick glance at Russia, saw him take out his phone and

pull up his messenger app, grumbling incoherently about how far he had to scroll up. Taking an even closer and riskier look, America spotted the contact name: Китай. Now, who the heck was that? Actually, wait, America doesn't know anyone Russia knows, so he shouldn't be too surprised.

Walking towards the lakeside houses and reaching the second paved road of Llyn, Russia crossed the road and, after a glance at the house numbers, turned right, beckoning for America to follow him and murmuring, "It must be somewhere around here..."

"What is somewhere around here?" America asked, desperate to get answers.

Russia simply smiled, "You'll see, just be patient." As they continued to walk down the sidewalk, Russia kept on reading the house numbers and looking back at his phone, as if he was trying to find a specific house. Just as America started to think they were on a wild goose chase, Russia smiled and said, "*There* it is."

Looking up, America saw a seemingly simple house with modest pale-yellow paint on the exterior of the second floor and some simple beige bricks adorning the first. They walked up to the house and Russia knocked on the door. After a few moments of audible shuffling and yelling in a language America quickly recognized as Mandarin, the door opened to a countryhuman with a red flag and four gold stars.

His face, which was in a polite smile at first, quickly broke into a wide grin upon seeing Russia, "Russia, you 坏蛋 **(bad egg [the English equivalent would be rascal])**, how are you? 請你進來! **(Come inside!)**" He moved out of the way, beckoning for the two to come inside, and Russia walked in with a large smile, America in tow.

The red-face countryhuman led them into a living room where another countryhuman sat playing on his phone. This new countryhuman's flag was all red except for one yellow star in the center. The guy who let them in gently smacked his friend on the head, saying, "來吧，放下手機. **(Come on, put down your phone.)** Russia stopped by."

One-yellow-star's head flew upward at the mention of Russia's name and he smiled widely when he spotted Russia, giving Russia and America a small wave while saying, "Ồ, chào, Nga! **(Oh, hi, Russia!)** And... new guy?" He ended questioningly.

Russia, who had put down his backpack and was gesturing for America to do the same, quickly remembered that not everyone in the room knows each other and facepalmed, saying, "Right! China, Vietnam, this is America, an old friend of mine."

The one with only one star smiled and waved again, saying "chào!" while the one with four stars said "你好。"

America nodded, waving nervously back, a little overwhelmed by the new faces. Russia smiled and continued, gesturing to each of his friends as he mentioned their names, "And, America, this is Vietnam and this is China."

America said a small "hi."

Russia smiled, "Ok, now that introductions are over... Vietnam, could I talk to you privately?"

Vietnam raised a brow before saying "Đồng ý," pocketing his phone, getting up, and leading Russia into a nearby room, leaving America, who was fidgeting nervously, behind to talk to China in the living room.

China cast America a concerned glance, "Are you not comfortable? I can go get something if you-"

"No!" America interrupted, accidentally being loud. He quickly became quieter, however, saying, "No, I'm fine, I'm just kind of nervous because you're the only friends of Russia's that I've met ever and I guess I just want to impress you so I'm kind of overthinking everything I'm doing and now I'm speaking too much."

"Really?" China asked, slightly amused.

"Yeah," America murmured in confirmation, "I don't really talk to new people all that often, so I'm guessing that's why I'm kind of nervous and uncomfortable."

China nodded, giving America a sympathetic look, and asked, "So, if that's the case, how did you meet Russia anyway?"

"Oh!" America started, already forgetting his previous anxiety at the mention of how he met Russia, "We met through an online fantasy game. We ended up in a raid group together, bonded over the game, and eventually made our own guild and chat."

But then America frowned a little bit to himself. Wait, why did that answer feel so wrong? It was how they met, though... how could it be wrong?

Dragging America out of his weird thoughts, China smiled softly, asking, "Was Geltheim the game?"

"Yeah, Gelt- wait," America paused, "How do you know about Geltheim?"

China laughed, "There was this point in time when I was still in high school where Russia wouldn't stop rambling about that game. I remember it all too vividly. So, that means you're Cosmos, right? That one player that logs in every day who also always has these crazy adventures with Russia."

America laughed nervously, "It's kind of creepy that you remember my nickname, but yeah."

China grinned, "I didn't speak much back then, I chose to listen instead. I don't regret that choice, because now I can vividly remember all the stupid things everyone would talk about during lunch in high school," China frowned slightly, "Actually wait, no, I regret that a lot," He shivered, "Mayonnaise will never taste the same again."

America blinked in confusion and curiosity. He kind of wanted to ask to hear the story behind that comment, but it would probably be better for everyone involved if he didn't.

Moving on from the subject of Mayonnaise, China asked, "Speaking of high school, you're a countryhuman, right?"

America nodded, "Yeah, I am. I mean," He continued with an unsure

laugh, "that should be obvious, right?"

China nodded at that, his frown deepening just the slightest bit, "How come I never saw you at high school? I might've graduated a year ago, but still. You're supposed to be around Russia's age, right? So I should've seen you at some point since all teenage countryhumans are supposed to go there."

America blinked. Shoot. He didn't expect to have to answer any question like that! What should he do? Lost in what to do, he quickly resorted to lying, "Oh, uhh, I-I'm being homeschooled."

Unfortunately for America, his lack of lying made him awful at it and China was easily able to see through his blatant lie. China narrowed his eyes at America before chuckling, "Homeschool, huh? I don't think I believe that."

America gulped. Well, that went horribly. Quicker than America had ever thought possible, the pleasant mood had disappeared, being replaced by a palpably tense one. America felt himself grow more and more nervous with each passing second. He wasn't ready for this sort of confrontation at all, "Well, uh, you do you then."

China glanced at America, an angry frown setting itself onto his face. What the heck was America hiding? Why wasn't he going to the high school UN runs? Why did he feel the need to hide something as inconsequential as this? China sighed, crossing his ankles and quickly becoming frustrated. He was done trying to be subtle or friendly about this, "Drop your lying act. I don't like people who lie."

The tension in the room grew and his eyes became slits, "Actually, why are you even lying to me in the first place?"

America gulped, feeling as though the tension in the air was about to choke him.

Uh oh.

--x--

Russia entered the room after Vietnam, watching as Vietnam sat

onto the table, "So, Vietnam."

In response, Vietnam gave Russia a goofy smile and asked playfully, "Why didn't you tell me you had a boyfriend?"

Russia felt himself flush and immediately responded, "It's not like that!"

"Oh, so it's one way? Ouch, that must hurt," Vietnam commented, filling in the gaps by assuming absolutely everything.

Russia felt himself grow even redder and admitted, "I mean, *maybe*-"

"HA!" Vietnam yelled victoriously, not even concerning himself on whether he was being too loud.

Russia's brows furrowed, "Why don't you have a problem with any of this?"

Vietnam, noticing how serious Russia was being, blinked confusedly and tilted his head to the side the slightest bit, "What do you mean by that? Why *would* I have a problem with it?"

Russia looked down at his feet, clenching his hands in a mixture of frustration and not knowing what to say. He desperately thought about what to say before pathetically saying, "My dad. My dad would have a problem with it."

Vietnam frowned, his own brows furrowing as he hopped off the table, "Russia... your dad doesn't control you anymore, he's long gone. You can do what you want. So what if he wouldn't approve of you being gay or having a boyfriend? It's not like he's around to say that to your face, is he?"

Russia snarled, "That's not what- he didn't *control* me."

"Then why should he now?"

Russia blinked in surprise, looking up at Vietnam. Russia shook his head and looked to the side, a conflicted expression on his face. His father didn't *control* him. No, Russia knew what it was. Russia knew what was happening-- He felt *guilty*. His father had done so much

for him throughout the years- sure, he didn't always do the best things, but he had tried to make it so that they would be prepared for the worst in the future. That they could succeed no matter what. But feeling this way towards America... Russia couldn't help but feel he was letting his father down somehow.

Vietnam walked around the room, gesturing lightly with his hand, "If anything, you're the one preventing yourself from embracing it fully. You're hesitant. Just... I dunno, just let your heart do what it wants, for frick's sake!"

Russia frowned, let his heart do what it wants? His heart *has* been doing what it wants! And look where he was now because of it! He's in love with someone who, for one, is a guy and, two, is his best friend and has been his best friend ever since freshman year in high school.

Not only that, but just because Russia knows he has a crush doesn't mean he's ready to accept himself for it. Recognizing that you're in love and accepting that love aren't the same thing. They never will be. And Russia doubted that his father, if he was still alive, would ever accept him for it. But did his dead father's opinion really matter to him?

Of *course* it did... Russia could lie to himself for hours about how it didn't, but he knew better than anyone that it did. Ever since he was young, he had always wanted to make his father proud, but this... this wouldn't make his father proud, and that's what hurt most of all.

And what if after all this, America doesn't feel the same? What if his heart is pining after someone who will never see him as anything more than a friend? What then? Does he just pretend, day in and day out, that he's fine with them staying friends? And what if... what if along the way... "What if my heart breaks?"

Vietnam stopped walking, his expression wrapped up in sudden thought. After a few moments, however, he smiled sweetly, his face a little bit red (if it can even get redder than his flag in the first place) as he wistfully spoke, "Then find someone who'll help it beat again."

Russia, quickly jumping on the chance to get the conversation off of him, forcefully smirked, "Vietnam, do *you* have a crush?

Vietnam jumped and his face got even redder as he turned towards Russia, vehemently shaking his head and racing towards the door, "KHÔNG KHÔNG KHÔNG- **(NOPE, NOPE, NOPE-)**"

Russia, panicking as Vietnam was getting closer to the door, yelled out, "Wait, Vietnam!" Vietnam, hearing his name, frustratedly turned towards Russia, an angry and flustered expression on his face. Russia almost laughed at the sight before he collected himself and asked, "Do you still have those Myrefall Planetarium tickets?"

--x--

"Answer me, America," China growled.

America, feeling as though he was sweating literal bullets, was miraculously saved by the sound of Russia and Vietnam walking down the hallway towards them. America let out a breath of relief and turned to see a happy Russia and relatively neutral Vietnam enter the room. Vietnam told everyone, "I'm going to get something, I'll be right back," China nodded in response and Vietnam ran upstairs to get whatever this something was.

Russia, after watching Vietnam race upstairs, turned to America and China and chirped, "So, how's it going?"

China smiled slightly, pretending as though nothing happened just now, "We're doing great."

America looked down at his feet, saying sarcastically, "Yeah, uh, we're doing just *great*."

America didn't have to look up to know that China probably glared at him for that. Honestly, America didn't really even understand what happened back there in the first place. One moment, China was really polite and nice, but the minute America lied it was like he had crawled into the wrong dungeon and had to fight a venomous snake boss that was about to kill him. In short, it was utterly terrifying.

Russia, who was giving America a slightly concerned look, was about to say something when Vietnam entered the room. America glanced up from his shoes just in time to see Vietnam hand Russia two slips of navy-blue colored paper. Russia smiled softly and put them into his pocket, saying, "Thanks a lot, Vietnam."

"No problem," Vietnam replied as he smirked and sat down on a chair, "Have fun on your date, yeah?"

Russia went red and hissed, "It's *not* a date."

"Not with *that* attitude it isn't!" Vietnam smugly chirped back.

"Shut up," Russia hissed, looking away to the side to hide his increasingly red face. Laughing, China turned to Vietnam, "You know what we should do?"

Vietnam raised a brow at this, also chuckling a little bit, "What?"

"Changying?"

Vietnam's eyes widened in delight and he immediately got up from his seat, "Yes."

China laughed, getting up himself, "Well, go on."

Vietnam smiled crazily, grabbing America's hand and proceeding to run out of the room, dragging America after him, "Come on, America, you gotta see this!"

Fully calmed down at this point, Russia chuckled, slightly confused by the vague exchange but still amused by his friend's excited reaction. Following in the direction Vietnam took, Russia found himself right in front of the door that led to what looked to be the backyard. Opening the door and stepping outside into the backyard, Russia noticed a small pier that stretched out from the backyard into the lake. Anchored to the pier was a small, recreational speed boat with four seats, the back two conjoined. He also spotted Vietnam, who was happily dragging America down the pier towards the boat.

Once next to the boat, Vietnam practically shoved America onto the

boat, he was so excited. After that, Vietnam bent down to get rid of the ropes and knots anchoring the boat to the pier. Once he had gotten rid of them all, he clambered onto the driver's seat of the boat and waved at Russia and China, who had just walked out of the house.

America scrambled up to a standing position and, spotting Russia halfway across the backyard, squealed with pure excitement, "They have a *boat!*"

Russia chuckled and yelled back, "Yes, yes they do!"

Vietnam deviously smirked at Russia and China, "If you two don't get here in the next ten seconds, I'm leaving without you!" To add to his point and simultaneous threat, he revved up the engine, making America giggle with excitement as the vibrations of the engine spread throughout the boat.

Vietnam chuckled at America's reaction and added, pointing at America with his left thumb, "I like this one!"

Before Russia could think about the stupidity of all this, however, China raced past him to get onto the boat before him. Russia jolted in surprise before laughing and chasing after China, using his long legs to try and catch up with him, "Oh, no you don't!"

In the end, due to China's superior expertise with getting on a boat this small and not freaking out, China won the race, taking shotgun while Russia had to sit next to America in the back. Vietnam then turned on the engine and said, "Buckle up, ladies."

Russia looked around his seat, seeing no seatbelts, and turned back to Vietnam, "But there are no seatbelts-" They then jerked forward, Russia and his ushanka almost falling into the back of China's seat. Almost. At the last moment, Russia stopped his movement forward with his right hand and held onto his ushanka with the other. Russia quickly recovered from being flung around the boat and put his hand permanently on his hat to keep it from flying off, yelling, "Vietnam, you little shit, I swear!"

Vietnam laughed evilly, speeding up, much to Russia's displeasure.

America, on the other hand, was thrilled! He had never gone on a boat before and it was so exciting! Just feeling the wind whip at his face was exhilarating. America put his hands in the air like he was on a rollercoaster ride, letting out various *"whoops!"* and shouts of joy. Vietnam, with a huge grin on his face, eventually joined him in the shouts and whoops of joy.

Once they had reached around the center of the lake, Vietnam and America finally shut up and Vietnam slowed down to a stop, stalling the engine. Vietnam turned to China, asking him to get the anchor. China simply nodded and climbed to the very front of the boat, which was where the anchor was. Making sure that the anchor was firmly attached to the boat, China dropped it into the lake. Vietnam eyed the anchor's rope, which was taut, and asked, "Did it touch?"

China laughed, dropping more of the anchor's rope into the water, "Of course it touched, we have 30 meters of rope here."

Vietnam smirked, "Ok, ok, just making sure you're doing your job correctly."

China rolled his eyes, shooting Vietnam a playful glare, "Of course I'm doing my job correctly, I literally *own* this boat."

Vietnam hummed at that, turning in his seat to see a slightly pale America. Vietnam blinked in surprise, "What's up? You were so excited before."

America looked nervously at how much rope was used, "How deep is it out here?"

Vietnam turned back to China, "How much rope did we use?"

China stopped checking the anchor to eye the rope. After a few moments of guesstimating in his head, China answered, "6 meters, give or take."

America pursed his lips, trying to do the math in his head but ultimately failing. Laughing awkwardly, he asked, "Do you know how long that is in feet?"

Vietnam cast a confused look at America before looking at his own feet. Still confused, he turned to look back at America, "How the heck would I know? And why would I want to know how many of my feet could stack across that distance?"

"Vietnam, you're an idiot," China scoffed as he climbed back into his seat, "He's talking about the imperial system. You know, the one Mr. UK used back in the day?"

Vietnam blinked in confusion for a few seconds before letting out a loud "ohhhhh" and commenting, "Heh, yeah, that makes a lot more sense."

America looked between Russia, Vietnam, and China, and nervously asked, "So, uh, nobody knows how long it is in feet?"

Russia, who had a concerned look on his face, said, "Нет," Vietnam simply said, "Không," and China didn't say anything. It was safe to assume that if he did know, he probably wouldn't tell America. America pursed his lips, looking at the dark water and scooching the slightest bit away from it, "Okay then."

Russia cast him a sympathetic look, remembering all to well that America couldn't swim. He mentally cursed at himself, he should've done something before they went this far out. Not knowing what else to do to comfort America, Russia gently grabbed America's hand, squeezing it reassuringly and murmuring, "Don't worry. If you fall, I'll be right in after you, okay?"

America looked at Russia, a little confused and relieved. Even so, he wasn't gonna go any closer than this to the edge of the boat if he could help it.

"Anyway," Vietnam started, smiling widely as he gestured to the scenery around them, "Isn't this amazing?"

America nodded at that, a little more hesitant than before. China chuckled, "This is a lot better than playing on your phone all day, isn't it?"

Vietnam smiled, smugly leaning back, "Why yes it- Wait a second,"

Vietnam paused, suddenly realizing what China said and turning to him, "Was that a personal jab just now?"

China put a hand to hand to his chest, faking offense, "Now, why in the world would you ask that?" He then dropped the act, "Yeah, of course, it's a personal jab, you 二百五 **(dimwit)**."

America snorted and Vietnam scoffed, rolling his eyes. He then turned to Russia and crawled over his seat to plop in between him and America, forcing America to scooch just the slightest bit closer to the edge of the boat. In doing this, Vietnam received a curious look from China and an annoyed and angry one from Russia. Vietnam said in a low voice, "Ok, me, you, we're gonna throw China off the boat."

Russia raised a brow before frowning when he saw America's nervous look. It's not like there wasn't the wall of the boat to stop anyone from falling off, but it was also relatively short and it was the only thing preventing people from falling off, so America was worried to say the least. Being on a boat was exciting, yes, but constantly being reminded of the fact you could die if you fell off the side wasn't. Russia looked back at Vietnam, his frown deepening, "No, now get back to your seat."

Vietnam almost looked insulted, "I gave you my planetarium tickets! You *owe* me!"

Russia rolled his eyes, "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just go back to your seat and then I'll help you."

Vietnam flashed a bright smile, proceeding to clamber back into his seat, much to America's- and Russia's- relief. After that, Vietnam yelled out, "3!"

With a small, amused look, Russia got up from his seat and Vietnam did the same, an excited smile on his face, "2!"

The two (really just Russia) grabbed China and lifted him into the air. "1!"

They then proceeded to throw China into the lake, Vietnam yelling

sweet victory into the summer air. America started giggling at the pure insanity of this all, and Russia couldn't help but laugh along with America's adorable laugh as he sat back down next to him. China surfaced a few seconds later, drenched and livid, and furiously yelled out, "Vietnam!" and a string of various curse words that made America laugh even louder.

Vietnam started laughing at China's cursing and said with a huge smile on his face, "What, that was funny!"

China looked at Vietnam as if he were insane, "Funny? I could've had my phone on me!"

"But you didn't," Vietnam retorted, sticking his tongue out at China, "You're too much of a worrywart to bring it on the boat anyway!"

China frowned, anger and frustration still clear on his face as he tried to calmly say, "You know me too well and I don't like that."

With that being said, Vietnam flashed a happy grin and yelled out, "I, Vietnam, is the victor!"

Through his laughter, America sputtered out, "I-I don't think that's grammatically-" Only for Vietnam to interrupt him and say, "Shush! Don't ruin my victory!"

Russia laughed, smugly grinning, "Don't you mean our victory?"

America laughed even more, clutching his gut from all his laughter, and Vietnam scoffed, "Oh shut up, you communist."

"I can taste the irony from here," Russia commented, receiving a small glare from Vietnam.

While this was happening, China had finally crawled back onto the boat, shivering from the cold lake water and getting up to smack Vietnam on the back of the head, muttering, "God, I hate you so much, you're such an asshole."

Vietnam turned around, grinning, "Hate you, too."

America smiled as China continued to grumble about how cold the

lake was as Vietnam continued to annoy and pester him nonstop. They were good people... or at least America thought so. Though America got the feeling that China didn't like him, America didn't blame him for that. America had lied to his face and wasn't very good at hiding it. But even so, watching them throw jab after jab at each other was nice. It was funny and charming and... it felt like America was a part of something, rather than being cast to the side. America smiled warmly to himself. Maybe, for just a few moments, he could pretend and play a small game where America goes to a normal school and that these are his normal friends, messing around with him during the freedom and insanity that is summer break.

In a few months, they'll be back in school, suffering through another year. But, through school, they'll hang out, mess around during lunch, complain about the horrible cafeteria food, and finish homework they forgot to do the night before. In America's small game of pretend, he was normal. In America's game of pretend, America had all sorts of friends who would say hi or even high five him on the way to class. In America's game of pretend, he would spend his free time hanging out with friends or playing on a school team, running around without any sort of wheeze in his breath or fear in his heart. In America's game of pretend, his option classes were about astronomy or even stars and he would go there sometimes after school to look through the telescope one last time. In America's game of pretend, he would be caught staring through the telescope in amazement by his teacher, who would laugh at him and maybe even give him permission to use the telescope because he was so passionate about the subject. In America's game of pretend, he would drag Russia around to experience things and go places just for fun. In America's game of pretend, he'll take trip after trip to explore and experience the world in all its wonderful glory. In America's game of pretend, his life wouldn't be perfect. It would have all sorts of missteps and mistakes that would make America's life imperfect yet somehow perfect at the same time. In America's game of pretend, he had a childhood for a past and a future for a backup plan. In America's game of pretend, after years of study and practice and preparation, he'll land on the moon. He'll take those first, daunting steps onto the moon's surface and know that he's finally done it. That he's finally reached the moon and the stars.

That whatever he's been searching for for so long will finally snap into place. That every little dream and a time he wished on a shooting star wasn't for nothing. That every hope he saved in his heart wasn't doomed to die a miserable death once that heart finally failed.

In America's game of pretend, he was happy.

In America's game of pretend, he was healthy.

In America's game of pretend, that's all he truly needed to reach his dreams.

Returning back to the harsh reality that is real life, America smiled slightly, "Hey, Rei?"

Russia turned to him, "What's up?"

America hugged himself gently, "Thank you for today, it's been so much fun."

Russia felt his expression melt into a soft smile as he said back, "No problem."

America felt his smile linger even as sorrow threatened to overtake him. This was fine. He was fine. He just...

He couldn't afford to waste the time he had left with sorrow.

--x--

After coming back inside, talking, doing some various card games and board games together, eating lunch and eating dinner, the bus was due to arrive in fifteen minutes. Getting on his backpack, Russia said, "I'm sorry, lads, but it's getting late. We have to go before we miss the bus heading to Myrefall."

Vietnam whined pathetically, "Noooooo, you can't go yet! You have to stay here!"

Russia laughed, "Have you forgotten? There isn't a hotel or anything in this town."

"Yes," China agreed, "But, we have a thing called a guest bedroom."

"And a couch!" Vietnam added.

Russia sighed and turned to America, "Are you fine with staying here overnight?"

America laughed, "Why wouldn't I?"

Russia smiled, "Just checking," He turned back to China and Vietnam, "Okay then, we'll stay overnight."

"Yes!" Vietnam yelled in victory, "That means I can force you to play video games with me until midnight!"

America gasped and his eyes shone like stars, "What video games do you have?!"

Vietnam became excited as he immediately started rambling out all of the games he had, "Smash, Breath of the Wild, Super Mario Odyssey, Animal Crossing-"

"Smash, right here, right now, and then when we're done, we're playing Minecraft," America adamantly said, interrupting Vietnam, before pausing, "You have Minecraft, right?"

Vietnam looked insulted, "Who do you take me for?! Of course, I have Minecraft, who doesn't?"

America smiled widely, "Then it's a plan!"

Like two excited pet dogs, they proceeded to race downstairs, where Vietnam claimed all of his consoles were. Russia laughed at their actions, "I get the feeling that'll turn for the worse quickly."

"With how Vietnam gets in any competitive game? You bet," China remarked, reaching into his cabinet before grabbing something and showing Russia it, "Vodka?"

Russia smirked, grabbing it, "You know me too well."

--x--

Turning his head, Russia saw Vietnam walk into the kitchen, "Ah, so the gremlin returns at this late hour of..." Russia checked the clock, "1 AM, almost impressive. Almost."

Vietnam yawned, attempting to blink away his tiredness to no avail, "I'm not sure whether I should be upset at that comment or not." Vietnam proceeded to sigh, starting to head upstairs to his room, "I'm too tired for any of this..."

"Wait, where's America?" Russia asked the sleep-deprived Vietnam.

"Your boyfriend is out like a light. Couldn't wake him up, so I left him down there," Vietnam said as he continued to walk upstairs. By the time he was done speaking, he was out of view.

Russia sighed, shaking his head, amused, and turned to the stairs that led downstairs. Wincing at the creaking sounds the staircase made, Russia walked down the stairs to reach a small living area with a ping pong table, a door that led to a bathroom, and a large TV with 2 couches that faced it. The room was really dark, so Russia flipped on the light so he could see. Laying in between the TV and one of the couches was a passed out America. Russia smiled at the sight. Even he had to admit, America looked cute with all the blankets bundled up around him and the controller still loosely in his hands. Russia walked up to America and, taking the controller out of his grasp and putting it away, picked him up along with the blankets still wrapped around him, trying not to wake him up despite what Vietnam said. He walked upstairs to the main level and, glancing between the couch and the stairs that led to the second floor, mentally decided that America would get the bed, and he'll just sleep on the couch. It wasn't his first time sleeping on a couch, after all.

Reaching the guest bedroom upstairs, Russia fumbled open the door and placed America gently on the bed. He could've tucked America into the bed, but he looked happy as is, and Russia didn't want to disturb him any more than he already has. He lingered there for a few seconds longer than he should've, contentedly watching America and sitting by America's side, before catching himself staring, blushing a little bit, tip-toeing downstairs, and plopping onto the couch.

Shuffling around a bit, Russia pulled out the two planetarium tickets Vietnam gave him. Russia smiled softly as he read what was printed onto them, "All-access, huh? Thanks, Vietnam." Putting away the tickets with a happy smile and mind, Russia adjusted his ushanka to cover his eyes and drifted off to sleep, already imagining America's adorable, happy face when Russia shows the tickets to him tomorrow.

Day Nine Part One

Bright morning peeked in through the windows of the small guest bedroom, illuminating it in a soft, golden light. As it traversed its way indoors, it illuminated the small specks of dust scattered around in the air, causing them to finally be visible to all. In the room was a sleeping countryhuman, bundled in a blanket his friend had wrapped him in the night before.

As it turns out, the light did not seem to like this sleeping person because they attacked his closed eyes with their bright rays, causing him to groggily wake up and blink open his eyes. Almost immediately, the country let out a small whine, pulling his cocoon blanket over his eyes to avoid those dastardly rays. The morning was groggily and slow, and America didn't want to get up today. Normally, he'd be up in a flash, but he didn't want to get up right now. Maybe it was the comfort of the bed, or maybe...

Right. He had stayed up, playing video games until... America wasn't sure when he fell asleep, just that he had. Vietnam must've moved him up to a guest bedroom or something. Deciding that was enough thinking for now, America snuggled into the blanket, letting his mind go comfortingly blank.

Not before long, however, the peaceful stillness of the groggy morning was interrupted by the sound of a door opening and America's blanket being pulled off of him. America yelped at the sudden cold that attacked his nerves. Not to mention, someone had ripped his blanket off! That's so cruel! However, America refused to yield to the cruel lack of a blanket, curling up into a ball for warmth and screwing his eyes tightly shut.

A chuckle interrupted the silence, "C'mon, you sleepyhead, we gotta go sooner or later."

America simply curled up into a ball even more. Nope. No waking up today for him. He was comfy and he was cold and he wanted his blanket back. His blanket...

America opened one eye and immediately hissed at the brightness of the room.

"So now the sleepy one responds," A voice that America groggily recognized as Russia's joked.

America let out a small whine and curled further into his ball. He didn't want to get up. Not today, nopity nope, nope, nope. But before America could process what was happening to him, he was lifted up and hauled onto someone's- probably Russia's- shoulder. America whined, "Noooo."

Russia chuckled, "Yesssssss," With that being said, Russia started walking downstairs, carrying America down with him. When he reached downstairs, he dropped America on the couch.

The force of being dropped onto the couch seemed to fully wake up America, who, once again, didn't want to leave the newfound comfort of the couch. Russia sighed, heading towards the kitchen, where Vietnam was looking for ingredients for breakfast.

Eventually, Vietnam found what he was looking for and started cooking, Russia watching him. The aroma of food cooking also managed to give America the strength to crawl off of the couch and into the kitchen, where he ended up busying himself by attempting to steal Russia's ushanka so he could wear it himself. When Russia asked America why he was trying to steal his ushanka, America simply pouted and said that it looked warm and comfy and that Russia owed it to him for "stealing his blanket like a meanie."

Not before long, Vietnam finished cooking and China had come downstairs. By this point, America had also successfully stolen Russia's ushanka and was happily wearing it. They all ate breakfast together and, when they were done, Russia started packing up his and America's stuff while America ran upstairs to change clothes.

When America and Russia were ready to go, everyone gathered around the front of the house and said their goodbyes. Having said his own goodbyes, America waved and started walking down towards the sidewalk while Vietnam waved happily and headed back inside. Before Russia could follow America, however, China

caught him by the arm, a worried look on his face. Confused, Russia paused. China looked at America for a split second before looking back at Russia, his face hardening, "Don't... Don't trust America fully. He's hiding something... something big."

Russia's eyes narrowing, not really liking what China was implying about his friend, "What do you mean by that?"

China's eyes flickered to the ground and he sighed, "He's hiding something. I know you and I haven't always been the closest of friends ever since..." China pursed his lips before skipping that subject and saying, "But I still don't want to see him hurt you, emotionally or otherwise."

Russia furrowed his eyes in anger. What does *that* mean? And why did he have to bring up... Russia frowned deeply, already feeling irritation build up inside him. China had no right to bring *that* up.

Everyone knows that you don't just bring *that* up.

China shook his head slightly when he saw Russia's increasingly mad expression. He doubted Russia believed his doubts about America, but he really hoped that Russia knew what he was doing. China truly did hope that America had good intentions, but he just wasn't sure. China wouldn't be surprised if Russia liked America so much because he wasn't there back then. Back then, Russia just wasn't... himself. China felt his lips twist downward in a slight frown. No matter how hard he tried to forget, China never could seem to forget how... empty Russia was then. But then again, China did nothing to help Russia back then, assuming it would pass with time.

Maybe that's why Russia became so distant to him in China's final year of high school.

So when Russia showed up yesterday, with that happy expression on his face, China couldn't help but feel overjoyed, too. He couldn't help but be suspicious of America when he lied, too, but who truly knows if America has bad intentions or not? China doesn't know the entirety of their personal stories, he's just looking in through a tiny keyhole. China muttered, "Just... just keep what I said in mind,

okay?" Letting go of Russia's arm, he waved a silent goodbye and ducked back inside, closing the door behind him.

Russia frowned at the door before America called out, "Russ, you coming?"

Russia blinked, turning around to face America and already feeling his anger melt away. How could he stay mad whenever America was around? Russia supposed that, for now, he could ignore what China said and simply have fun. Russia smiled, calling out, "Yeah, I'm coming!"

Running towards America, Russia shook his head lightly. Yeah, China was probably just overreacting. Whatever America is hiding, if he's even hiding anything in the first place, it can't be that serious. Russia trusted America, and he also knew that some things are better left unsaid.

Everything is just fine...

Right?

Russia smiled.

Yeah, of course, they are.

--x--

"I just can't believe it!"

"Can't believe what?" Russia chuckled as he put his stuff down on the hotel bed.

"I mean," America started, already investigating and exploring the hotel room, "I knew that Myrefall was a city and all, but I didn't think it was a big enough city to have a hotel!"

"Multiple hotels, actually," Russia commented.

America's eyes shone, "That's amazing! But do that many people really come by on a regular basis?"

Russia paused before replying, "I mean, yes, I'd assume so."

America hummed, "I wonder why."

Russia stifled a small laugh and America gave him a confused look. Russia responded, "Just open the curtains, I'm sure you'll see it."

America shrugged before heading up to the window and opening the curtains, "Holy shoot!" He exclaimed, "You can see the ocean from here!"

Russia laughed, "Exactly. Considering the beach, the planetar-" Russia cut himself off abruptly and America gave him a weird look. Russia quickly recovered with an awkward chuckle, "Considering the beach, the nearby mountains, and the amusement park-"

America gasped loudly, "There's an amusement park?!"

Russia blinked before simply saying, "Yes."

America's face widened into a large grin, "Oh my gosh, we have to go to it today!"

Russia laughed as America ran towards the door, fumbling in his attempt to open it, "Slow down! Why are you in such a rush?"

America paused, whipping around to face Russia, "I'm in a rush because I've never been to an amusement park before and I *need* to go to one! Not going to one is 100% a crime!"

Russia laughed again, "Ok, ok, if you insist, just not today."

America paused for a moment before tilting his head in confusion, "What do you mean, 'not today?'"

Russia smiled, "I mean that I already planned out what we were going to do today."

America's brows furrowed, "You did?"

"Yep."

"When did you do that?"

Russia thought about it before saying, "Around two days ago, actually."

"Huh," America said, "Well, okay then, but you owe me an amusement park day, got that?"

Russia chuckled, "Sure thing."

America smiled widely, "Ok! Let's do what you planned then!" With that being said, he turned around and successfully opened the door, walking into the hotel hallway. At least, he *was* in the hallway for a solid second before jumping and running back into the hotel room, whining out to a chuckling Russian, "Don't you dare laugh! Forgetting to bring stuff is normal!"

Russia only continued to chuckle as an embarrassed American grabbed his hotel room key, his wallet, and his phone. Russia grabbed his stuff as well. Once they had everything, they exited the hotel room, Russia putting his right hand in his pocket and feeling the paper admission tickets.

--x--

America tapped his foot impatiently while they were in the car. Russia had called a vber, and now they were driving towards whatever Russia had planned. America was looking out the car window, his mind filled with questions about where they were going and what they were doing. Was there anything else he had forgotten about Myrefall? There's the beach, the mountains, the amusement park... America was pretty sure there was something else important in this city, but he couldn't exactly place it.

America kept watching as the two, three, and four-storied buildings went past them and out of view. The city didn't have any skyscrapers or anything, but the downtown area- the part of the city they were currently in, probably- really felt like the beginnings of a large city, even though it wasn't. It felt so much bigger than it actually was, and America loved watching the buildings fly by.

But then the car took a turn southward. The taller buildings started to make way for houses of all shapes and sizes. The houses were close together, but they weren't so close that they felt cramped. Some houses had fences, and some didn't. After a while of driving past various subdivisions, The car proceeded to turn onto a road that led up a small mountain on the edge of the city. America quickly cast a confused look at Russia, "Where are we going anyway?"

Russia smiled, "You'll see."

America turned back to the window, pouting. Where were they going? What was he forgetting? As they continued to drive up the small mountain, America furrowed his eyebrows in thought. What was there to do on a mountain?

Before America could think too deeply about it, however, the car came to a grounding halt and America looked out the window. On the edge of a small cliff was a decently large building. At first glance, the building seemed to simply be a museum, but, looking at it closer, America could've sworn he saw a dome near the back of the building.

Suddenly, everything clicked.

America gasped loudly, turning to Russia, who had walked up to his side, "No way..."

Russia chuckled, gesturing at the building with his hand, "Well, America, welcome to the Myrefall Planetarium."

For a split second, America didn't know what to think. For one, he was kinda pissed at himself for forgetting that this building existed. Secondly, Russia had brought him *here*! A planetarium! Though he knew he only said it a day or so ago, the fact Russia brought them here with America in mind was just... really nice. Russia really did care a lot, didn't he?

Without quite knowing why, America smiled at that thought. With that, he let his giddiness take over.

Letting himself run loose, America giggled in pure delight before running towards the entrance. Russia almost jumped in surprise before chasing after America, laughing at America's excitement. As they raced into the building, the two came to a stop in front of the admissions desk. Chuckling lightly, Russia went up to the employee running the desk and handed her the two tickets stuffed in his pockets. She smiled before checking them in and giving them paper bracelets to wear to confirm that they had paid. Once that was finally over, America ran down the hallway to the first of the exhibits, Russia once again chasing after him. Once America reached the end of the hallway, he stilled, almost as if he was trying to take in the glory of it all. Pausing as well, Russia took a look around, trying to see through America's eyes. Russia couldn't help but wonder what this all looked like to him. To Russia, it looked like a normal museum, but to America? Russia could only wonder.

Russia smiled. Actually, no, he wouldn't wonder, because the answer was right there on America's face. America's wide and ecstatic smile was all Russia needed for an answer. America glanced at Russia for a split second before racing over to one of the exhibits. Russia smiled, following after him.

Russia could get used to this happy feeling he felt whenever America smiled.

As they moved from exhibit to exhibit, the two were in eternal smiles. America was smiling at all the exhibits he got to see and read, while Russia was smiling because America was so happy. In fact, most of Russia's attention was focused on America as America led them through the exhibits, occasionally talking and rambling about the information the exhibits presented.

Once again, Russia found his attention wandering back to America. America was intently looking at a small machine that exhibited how meteor landings look like. Or, at least, how they should look like. His lips were in a small, adorable "o" as he waited for the ball to drop onto the sand. Russia smiled at America's cute expression, chuckling a bit. Hearing Russia's chuckle, America turned, ready to ask a question on what was so funny. Before he could, however, he noticed Russia staring at him and froze. Russia immediately felt embarrassed; however, before he could sputter out an exclamation,

America, to Russia's surprise, simply gave him a wide smile before turning back to the exhibit. Russia felt his face burn red before smiling as well, turning back to the exhibit. Maybe if he had been paying more attention, he would've noticed the nervous red that slightly dusted America's cheeks.

As it turns out, however, the ball in the demonstration exhibit had already dropped. Seeing the travesty of the fact he missed it drop down onto the sand, America turned back to Russia with a bummed out (America would say devastated) expression. Russia simply laughed, saying that "it was your fault for looking away."

...

America refused to talk to Russia for the next five minutes.

America continued to lead them through the exhibits before something caught his attention and he paused. Russia paused as well, confused. Following America's line of sight, Russia saw another desk and a small line in front of a door. Reading the sign above the desk, Russia realized what the line was for: the actual planetarium part of this building.

"Do you want to go in there?"

America jumped before turning towards Russia and moving his hands in a dismissive gesture, "I mean, kinda, but what's the point if I've already seen the real stars?"

Russia laughed, "What's the point? The point is that you want to do it, so we'll do it," Russia said before walking over to the counter to pay for the tickets.

"This really isn't necessary!" America tried to insist. He normally wouldn't act this way, but a small part of him didn't want to impede on Russia too much.

"Yes, it is," Russia replied with a reassuring smile, "I'd like to think what you want to do is *very* necessary. This is your trip, after all. I'm just your humble guide. You said so in your letter, didn't you?"

America blinked before bursting into a fit of laughter, remembering

his stupid and awkward letter. He let out a loud snort and hurriedly covered his mouth with his hands, trying to suppress his now embarrassing laughter. Russia smiled widely, insisting, "No, no! Don't cover your face, that was adorable!"

America and Russia both paused, both of their minds trying to comprehend what Russia just said. Russia immediately cringed at himself and blushed furiously, inching just the tiniest bit away, "I-uh-"

Seeing Russia's reaction, America loudly snorted again, this time letting it be and putting his hands to his sides. He leaned a little bit on Russia, saying jokingly with a small snort, "What? Are you falling for my laugh, Rei?"

Russia smirked, despite his blushing, "I have no idea what you're talking about," and with that being said, Russia moved away from America suddenly, making America fall to the ground. Russia smirked down at America, who was still confused by the fact Russia let him fall, and said, "I don't know, America. The only one falling here... is *you."*

America blinked up at Russia, feeling rage and embarrassment cloud his thoughts and flush his cheeks. Before he could do anything crazy, however, he paused, feeling an intense feeling of deja vu as he looked up at Russia, who was standing above him. A sense of familiarity flickered over him, and America couldn't help but had a feeling this had happened before. America felt confusion fill his thoughts as he scoured his memories looking for when something similar might've happened.

Oh! Russia picked him up after that raccoon stole his food when they camped in the woods, right? That must be it!

As soon as America found some sort of feasible solution, he quickly forced his mind to change subject, disliking this feeling he was getting in his gut that he was forgetting something... important. Well, whatever it was probably wasn't important if he forgot about it... right?

Either way, America felt his previous anger and embarrassment

return to him as he started paying attention to the world around him again. Russia was still looking down at him, concerned. In a flash, he jumped back onto his feet, "You're so mean, that was completely uncalled for!"

"Ok," Russia shook his head, chuckling, before walking over to the planetarium desk. This entire time they had been in the museum part of the building, and here was the actual planetarium part of the building. They might as well go to both, right?

Watching Russia head up to the desk and talk to the guy running it, America felt his rage and embarrassment fade away once again and he smiled slightly, a strangely familiar happiness encroaching on his mind. America couldn't quite understand it. What was this? And why was it... so eerily familiar? America couldn't help but feel as though he's forgotten something, and it messed with his brain. When did he first start getting this feeling? What was he forgetting? It felt like America was going crazy with questions whose answers didn't make sense.

"Ame!" Russia called, snapping America out of his thoughts. America looked up to see Russia waving two tickets above his own head. America smiled slightly.

... He could worry about that stuff later. America then walked up to Russia, and they waited a few minutes before the previous group finished and they were allowed to head inside. They sat down near the middle, as per America's request, and waited a few moments before the employee working the planetarium started the show.

The employee showed the stars of the different seasons and where to look for the most famous constellations such as Pegasus, Orion, the Big Dipper, etc. Not only did he do that, but he also showed what tonight's stars would look like and explained that the North Star being the brightest star in the sky was false; it was just the star in the top-center of the sky. As it turns out, being in the top-center of the sky had its advantages because the North Star didn't move much throughout the night like the other stars did, making it an ideal star to use for navigation.

Though the projection of the night sky definitely wasn't as

spectacular as the real thing, America couldn't help but be excited as the show went on. At one point, he squinted at the "stars," making them appear spiky. After doing that, America turned his head to look at Russia, about to say something, before pausing. He blinked as his mind suddenly went blank and another strong sense of deja vu crashed into him. What was he about to do? Suddenly, America felt an inexplicable ache in his chest, turning back at the false night sky.

His brows furrowed as he looked at the projection, all earlier excitement fading. Why did he feel like he was forgetting something more than what he was just about to say? Why was this the second time today that he felt this weird sense of deja vu? What was happening?

For the rest of the show, America couldn't express the same excitement as earlier, his mind caught up in the confusion of whatever he was forgetting. Now it felt like there was a hole in America's memory somewhere, like something just like this had happened before...

America's brows furrowed. He couldn't ignore this deja vu anymore. Sure, deja vu happening once in a day is fine, but two strong senses of deja vu less than thirty minutes from each other, both of which America couldn't figure out their origins? Now *that* was fishy. And, sure, maybe America should just forget it, I mean it's not like remembering anything will make much of a difference when he only had four weeks left- three weeks now, actually.

But America also couldn't shake the feeling that it was important somehow, and that the answer was right in front of him.

It was... frustrating, to say the least.

When the show was over, America and Russia walked out of the circular planetarium room, Russia casting America a few concerned looks.

"Hey, Ame?"

America jumped, looking up at Russia. What was it now? The

millionth time today Russia had snapped him out of his thoughts? It felt like the millionth time, anyway. "What? What's up?" America asked.

Russia pursed his lips, "Did something happen in there?"

America paused before forcing a smile onto his lips and replying, "No, no, it's nothing. I'm just overreacting over nothing," America grinned mischievously, grabbing Russia's arm to pull him along, "Come on! We have an entire second floor to finish before one-thirty!"

"Wait! Let's get lunch first, now that we have this break," Russia suggested, pulling America to a stop.

America thought for a moment before gingerly letting go of Russia and saying, "Okay!"

After getting and eating lunch, America proceeded to once again grab Russia- this time by his hand- and drag him around and through all of the exhibits and displays on the second floor.

--x--

It was around four o'clock when the two walked out of the museum. America had long since stopped dragging Russia around by his hand, but, even so, he *had* been dragging Russia around for a while. And, because of that, Russia couldn't help but let his mind wander back to the feeling of America's hand in his. Maybe America simply forgot to let go of Russia's hand, or maybe he barely noticed the physical contact through all his excitement, but Russia couldn't help but think about it... and hope that, maybe, America kept holding his hand for another reason.

Russia frowned. It probably wasn't like that, and he really needed to stop being so gay.

They called for another vber to drive them back to the hotel and they went up to their room, America happily plopping down onto the bed and laying down the first chance he could. Russia smiled and told America he was heading to the restroom.

Once Russia was out of view, America sat up, looking at the room around him. America stood up and walked over to the window, whose curtains were still drawn to the sides. He found his eyes wandering across the coastline as his mind became captured in thought, thinking about what had happened when he fell down and what had happened during the planetarium show.

America clutched the part of his shirt over his chest as that aching feeling returned. He screwed his eyes shut. What was even going on?

"Porrrkupines?"

America's eyes shot open and he looked around the room in confusion. Who said that? America then heard the sound of running water, and Russia walked out of the washroom a few moments later. America frowned, "Did you say something?"

Russia shot America a confused look, "No? Did you hear something?"

America blinked in confusion, glancing back at the window, "No... No, I guess I didn't."

America watched through the corner of his eye as Russia walked up to his left side. America turned to look at him. When the two made eye contact, Russia gave America a warm smile. America got another sense of deja vu, but it didn't hit him as hard as it did those earlier times.

America smiled back, an unnoticeable red dusting his cheeks. Strangely enough, this recurring deja vu felt warm and familiar, like a huge teddy bear's embrace. A bit of familiarity and reassurance in a whole new, unfamiliar world. A world America couldn't wait to explore.

America turned back to the window, putting his fingers up against the glass and leaning against it the slightest bit. Down below, he could see a small crowd of people walk down the street, all in one direction. The street was also partially blocked off as a pretty steady stream of people walked through it. If America strained his ears

enough, he could also faintly hear music echoing down the streets. Was there a festival going on? Or something similar? The people down there looked so joyful and excited, and America kinda wanted to know what the festival was for and where the main venue was- if there even was a festival.

Huh. Maybe the festival was why there was an unusually small amount of people in the planetarium.

"Russia, do you know if there's a festival today?" America asked, pointing down at the assumed festival-goers below.

Russia looked down as well before shrugging, "No, I don't know," Russia smiled, "Do you want to go down there and figure it out?"

America turned to Russia, a bright grin on his face.

"Heck yeah, I do!"

Day Nine Part Two

Walking down the streets towards where they thought the festival was was a strange thing. They felt like they stuck out too much- they were countryhumans, after all- but they also knew that probably nobody cared. They also felt like foreigners, which they also were. But, once again, probably nobody cared.

That didn't make them feel any different, however.

Actually, Correction: Russia was the only one of the two who felt that way. America was either too giddy or unobservant to know or care.

Turning the corner along with the crowd, they noticed what seemed to be a park-like venue. Honestly, what surprised them the most was that it was literally in the middle of a ton of two-storied and three-storied buildings. The venue felt out of place, in a way. As they walked down the sidewalk leading to the park, Russia noticed a small restaurant to their left. He would've insisted they go inside and have a snack or something, but America had already run up to the park entrance, waving Russia over.

Russia huffed at America with a small smile on his face. I guess he'll just have to mentally mark that place for now. Catching up to America, Russia walked into the park with him. Upon walking inside the park, Russia could faintly start to hear music reverberating around him and America. Russia could only guess that the buildings around them helped to trap the sound inside. America must've heard it, too, as he said excitedly, "Oh! They're doing some sort of music festival!"

Russia nodded, "Yeah, I suppose so."

America smiled excitedly, once again grabbing Russia by his arm and yanking him towards the source of the music, a wide grin on his face, "C'mon! Let's get closer so that we can see the stage!"

Not waiting to hear Russia's response, America weaved through person after person like some sort of expert while dragging Russia along. At some point, America let go of Russia, and Russia just clumsily followed after him, bumping into a lot of people. Russia couldn't count on his fingers how many times he's apologized so far for that. He's just lucky none of the people he bumped into had drinks. That would've been a nightmare.

The duo also got some weird looks- Russia couldn't tell whether they got the looks because they were countryhumans or because they were practically shoving through the crowd to get a better view- but America, once again, either didn't notice or didn't care, and Russia was glad for that.

Once America deemed them close enough, he stopped, peering up excitedly at the people performing on the temporary stage. If the music had been a lot softer, Russia might've been able to hear America's light and slightly worrying wheezing, but, like any good concert, the music was blasted at full. You could hear absolutely nothing but the music and the people around you, and only if they yelled what they were saying really loud. Disliking how loud it was, Russia reached to cover his ears. This was his first time ever at a concert and it was... too sweaty and loud to say the least. Russia already wanted to leave, but also he didn't want to leave America alone here. Glancing at the excited American, Russia tapped his shoulder, causing him to look at Russia, and yelled so America could hear him, "HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO A CONCERT BEFORE?"

America gave Russia a confused look and tried to yell something back, only for it to get lost in the blasting music. Russia sighed. He did not want to deal with this. Even so, he raised his voice quite a bit and asked the same question again. This time, America heard him and, with a deceivingly happy face, shook his head no.

Okay, now Russia really couldn't leave him here alone. Even so, Russia already hated the concert. First time being at a concert festival thing and Russia rated it 0/10. Too sweaty, too loud... which dumbass had the brilliant idea of having a concert festival during June?! Summer was already hot enough as is, you don't need to add the body temperatures of a great big mass of what were

probably drunk people, too.

Noticing Russia's uncomfortable and angry face, America's own smile fell as he yelled loudly, "WHAT'S WRONG?"

Russia forced a small smile and yelled back, "IT'S NOTHING, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT."

America gave Russia a weird look. His face looked concerned as he cocked his head to the side, making Russia's heart ache in a way he could never properly explain. Russia, still forcing his smile, gave America a thumbs up before turning to the band, hoping that America will do the same. America's brows furrowed just the slightest bit before he shrugged and turned back to the stage, his earlier excitement quickly returning as he started unconsciously jumping up and down on the balls of his feet as the band continued to play. Russia sighed to himself in relief. America seemed so excited about it earlier, and Russia couldn't bring himself to ruin that. Russia quickly pulled out his phone to check the time before once again shoving it into his pocket. 5:20. Okay, he can live with that. Russia had forced them to take a half-hour or so of rest earlier, so Russia would only have to last around an hour before he can use the excuse of dinner to get out of this sweaty mass of people.

He just had to wait one hour...

Russia groaned to himself. This was going to be the longest hour of his life.

Russia couldn't help but check his phone over and over as the band transitioned into all sorts of different songs. At some point, a new band replaced the previous one, but Russia didn't really care- he was honestly trying to tune everything out at this point. Well, tune everything other than America out. America was the only person making this at least partially bearable. Maybe it was America's excitement, maybe it was his grin but...

Russia sighed to himself, crossing his arms as a warm smile settled onto his face.

As much as Russia hated this concert, seeing America so happy was

just the tiniest bit worth it.

--x--

6:22.

That was the time when Russia went to check his phone for the fiftieth time that hour. Russia couldn't help but grin, yelling out over the blasting music, "HEY, AME?"

America turned to Russia, a wild grin on his face as he hopped up and down in excitement. America had actually stayed consistently excited throughout the past hour, which was something Russia could neither understand nor fathom. Not to mention, Russia also occasionally saw him mouth the words to a few of the songs as they were played by the bands. He might've been singing them out loud, too, but it was too loud to really tell. America yelled back, "YEAH? WHAT'S UP?"

"DO YOU WANT TO GRAB SOME DINNER, IT'S 6:20."

America looked surprised at the time before saying, "YEAH, SURE. WHERE ARE WE EATING?"

Russia smiled, "I KNOW JUST THE PLACE."

--x--

Entering the restaurant Russia had noticed earlier, the two greeted an empty restaurant, save for a small counter near the back where a lady who looked around the age of thirty stood, intently looking at the type of handheld notebook waitresses would have. Russia was pretty sure they were called server books, but he wasn't sure. On the walls, there were all sorts of decorations, ranging from paintings to some wood carvings. The wood carvings in particular seemed precisely and delicately handmade. Hearing the sound of a door close, the lady looked up from her notebook, a smile instantly lighting up her face as she spoke, "Hello, hello! Take any seat you'd like."

America peered around before spotting booth seats on the right walls, smiling, and immediately walking up to a table of two with a

single booth seat and taking the booth seat for himself. Russia smiled, a little bit amused, before sitting in the normal chair across from America, who was happily bouncing up and down on his plush seat. With a small smile, the lady walked up to them.

"So, if I may ask, vhat are you hotshots doing in town?" She said with a slight accent, her eyes crinkling upwards as she smiled playfully.

America answered, smiling as well, "We're here to explore and make use of the summer!"

She hummed, "Hm, but wouldn't you find more stuff to do in the big city, vhere you countryhumans are supposed to live?" The lady said, giving Russia and America restaurant menus.

America shrugged, "Cities are overrated, you can't even see the stars when you look up."

"Not like the view here is much better," the lady smiled again, "I blame Carlisle, the nearby city. There are too many people stuffed in that small place. But," Her eyes sparkled with excitement, and Russia couldn't help but be impressed by how animated her face was, "I heard that on the day of the festival- the day of the first full moon of the summer- the entire city of Carlisle blacks out, and you can see every star there is to see in the sky."

America's eyes sparkled with excitement, "Really?"

"Yep!" She nodded, "If I had the time, I'd go this year, but unfortunately I now have two time-consuming rascals called children."

America playfully gasped, "Absolutely horrendous!"

The lady grinned, putting on an entertaining devastated expression, "The horror! The travesty!"

Russia watched, thoroughly entertained, as they did their back and forth. Next, America asked, "What's your name?"

"My name's Alice, but everyvon just calls me Ali," She said, her

accent poking through once again.

Russia finally butted in, asking, "Where do you come from? I can hear a slight accent."

Alice smiled warmly as if she was remembering fond memories from long ago, "I come from Germany, born and raised. I moved here a little over six years ago. My accent vas a lot worse then, but I've worked on it and it's gotten a lot better."

America oohed and asked, "So what is the music festival for?"

Alice laughed slightly, "Vell, don't tell anyone outside, but the music festival is basically just a rip-off of Carlisle's festival, which happens in around a week on the night of the full moon. If you ask me, Carlisle's festival is a lot better."

America nodded excitedly, making it all too clear on his face he was planning something, "Oo! What do they do in Carlisle?"

"Hm, I've already told you about the blackout, but they also do fireworks, a carnival, and a concert. On the days leading up to the festival, there are usually a ton of smaller beach parties as vell. Basically, party central."

America looked excited, "That sounds so cool!"

Alice chuckled a little bit, "I suppose it is. Vell, I'm going to give you two time to decide your orders. I'll be behind the counter if you need me."

The minute she walked away, America excitedly turned to Russia, who sighed with an amused look on his face, "Let me guess, you want to go to the festival in Carlisle?"

America gasped, "How did you know?!"

"Hmm," Russia said, a teasing grin on his face, "I think it was magic."

America smiled back, reaching over to playfully punch Russia in the arm. Russia grinned at the reaction. Moving on from that comment,

America said in amazement, "An entire city blacking out, can you imagine it, Rei? That must be an amazing sight to see... The buildings going dark and being able to watch as, slowly, the entire galaxy of stars starts twinkling into view..."

Russia smiled, the amazed expression on America's face as he imagined it warming Russia's heart, "Yeah, that must be quite the sight."

America smiled slightly, turning to look down at his menu, "I hope I get to see it."

Russia gave America a weird look, a small smile on his face, "What are you talking about? Of course, you're gonna see it! If you want to go, we're gonna go."

"Yeah," America chuckled, flipping the menu over nervously, "What *am* I talking about?"

--x--

Saying a happy goodbye to Alice, the two started heading back to their hotel. As much as America wanted to go back into the fray of the festival, Russia didn't. So, America insisted that they play rock paper scissors to decide. As you can probably tell, Russia won, and now America was way too bummed for his own good.

Russia looked down at the sad American with a small smile, nudging his side, "Come on, I won fair and square."

"I know," America muttered, his gaze still firmly set on the ground.

Russia chuckled, "If you're really this sad about it, I guess we can go back to the festiva-"

"Nope!" America suddenly interrupted, jumping into an upright position and slapping his own cheeks, much to Russia's surprise. When he ceased slapping his own cheeks, he said, "No, you won; so, we do what you want to do, which is go back to the hotel. I refuse to lose any more of my dignity by going back to the music festival! I refuse!"

Russia chuckled, saying, "Remember, that's your decision, not mine."

America hesitated before nodding firmly, almost as if he was trying to convince himself into his decision.

Russia laughed nervously, "Good, because, if I'm being honest with you, I really hated being there."

"You did?" America asked, surprised look in his expression.

"Yeah, it was too uncomfortably sweaty and just too loud. I could barely go a few seconds without someone knocking into me, it was kind of annoying," Russia finished his sentence with a small chuckle.

America slightly frowned, "What? Why didn't you tell me? We always could've moved further away and out of the crowd."

Russia blinked before laughing at his stupidity, "Yeah, you're right, we could've. But... I didn't want to ruin your excitement, even if I had to be uncomfortable the whole time."

America's brows furrowed a little bit, making his face look sad. He was about to say something before his eyes widened in realization. His frown deepened before he laughed to himself and smiled slightly, looking away from Russia and instead looking at the stretch of sidewalk in front of them, "Thanks for dealing with it for over an hour with me, though," His smile became almost shy. It was a rare and peculiar sight that made Russia's heart pound. America continued, "It means a lot to me."

Russia felt red creep into his face and looked away as well, a nervous smile on his face as he replied, "It's no problem. Thanks for going back to the hotel with me."

America's grin became just the slightest bit more confident as he echoed back, "It's no problem, I'm just glad I got to spend the day with you, you're fun to be around. So, thank you for that."

Russia nudged America with his elbow, making America stumble the slightest bit and look up in confusion. Russia smirked, "Come

on, now you're just trying to one-up me in saying thank you, which I'm pretty sure shouldn't be a thing."

America laughed, "Maybe I am."

"Uh-huh, 'maybe.'"

America looked up at Russia, a look in his eyes Russia couldn't exactly explain. It was warm and sweet and somehow familiar. America chuckled softly, smiling warmly, "Yeah, maybe."

Day Ten

America woke up tired. His tiredness was probably his fault because he snuck out of the hotel room the minute Russia fell asleep, but that's beside the point. He had visited that nice lady, Alice, and may or may not have vented a little. She just felt like a trustworthy person, so he... spilled his problems a little. Nothing too serious, just enough to feel the slightest bit better. He also asked her to hold onto something for him.

America kinda felt bad... he doubted that he'll ever be able to see her ever again. America nervously chuckled to himself, rubbing his neck. Well, that got a little bit too dark for comfort. America didn't want to think about that today, he already had enough on his plate as it is. Yawning loudly, America stood up, looking at the time. 7:30? That early? Wow, no wonder America felt so...

America turned and saw his reflection in one of the many mirrors in the hotel room. Some sort of gremlin with horrendous eye bags was staring back at him.

... tired.

America felt confusion overcome him. This *wasn't* normal. You don't get those eyebags from one night of bad sleep. It looked like America hadn't been sleeping for days. America clenched the part of his shirt that was positioned above his heart with his fist. Was... was this because of his heart? But it's barely been over a week since America left the hospital! America's breathing quickened, causing some sort of weird wheezing noise to occur every time he breathed in. Surely it wasn't because he's been rationing his beta-blockers? Though it admittedly was a bad idea, he only had enough medicine on him for 2 weeks, not four, so he...

... Improvised a little bit.

Looking at himself in the mirror, America could only think: 'I can't let Russia see me like this, I don't want to worry him.' How in the

world would he cover it up, though?

Letting go of his shirt, America put his fist on top of his other hand as he got an idea. Makeup! Would concealer work? Would they even have pure white concealer? I guess America had to figure that out for himself. But what if Russia woke up before he had the chance to apply it? America would probably have to apply it in a public bathroom before he got back into the hotel room, then.

As America was forming this plan, his stomach growled, making America suddenly blush in embarrassment. Yeah, he should also buy something to eat while he's out. Grabbing money and a key card for the room, America headed out, a plan forming in his mind while he left Russia behind and all alone in their hotel room.

--x--

Russia woke up to silence. Turning to the clock in the hotel room, he noticed that it was 9 AM. He then looked at America's bed, knowing that he would still be there, sleeping... only to see no one at all. Russia's heart seemed to jump up into his throat as worry took ahold of his mind. He shot up, scrambling out of his bed. What? Where was America? Where did he go?! Russia swore, if this is some sort of prank, he's gonna-

Russia heard the sound of the door unlocking and opening. He whipped around to see America with a key card in one hand and a bag of pastries in the other. America froze at Russia's distraught state before cocking his head and asking, "You okay there, Russ?"

Russia paused before he let out a breath he didn't know he was holding in, relaxing his formerly tense muscles, "Where were you?"

America gave him a curious smile, lifting up the bag of pastries a little bit, "Isn't that a little obvious?"

Russia chuckled breathlessly and nodded, "Right, right. Next time you leave, leave a note or something, I was worried."

"Noted," America laughed, pulling out a large blueberry muffin and asking, "Do you want it or no?"

Russia rolled his eyes before taking the muffin, sitting down on the side of his bed and biting into the pastry. America, in turn, pulled out another pastry, a decently-sized chocolate croissant, and started biting into it while still standing. While eating, America demanded with his mouth full, "Since you owe me an amusement park day, we're going there today."

Russia chuckled, quickly swallowing the portion of muffin that was in his mouth and saying, "Really? Well, ok, but if that's the case we should head over to Carlisle today, too."

"Hmm?" America hummed questioningly, "How come?" He asked, his voice muffled slightly by the food in his mouth, the gremlin.

"Because the amusement park is in between here and Carlisle, it just makes more sense. Carlisle is a bigger city than Myrefall, too, so there's probably more stuff to do, including the festival."

"That's a great idea!" America exclaimed, Russia wincing since there was still food in his mouth.

"Swallow before you speak, you ill-mannered ogre," Russia said good-heartedly, shaking his head in disapproval.

America snorted, nodding. He swallowed quickly, then said, "Whatever you say, *mom,*" to which Russia rolled his eyes with a smile.

--x--

America was jumping with excitement by the time they got off the bus. After a 15-minute-long bus ride, they had arrived at the music park. From the outside, it was clear why the amusement park was so popular. Now, you may be wondering: why the heck is there an amusement park here? The simple answer is capitalism. This island has people just like any other place, but you wanna know what this island didn't have fifteen years ago? An amusement park. So some land was bought, and an amusement park was built. The nearby city of Carlisle, barely 10 minutes away, boomed due to the amusement park, eventually staking its claim as the second-largest city on the island, the largest city commonly being nicknamed

"Pangaea" due to its well-known countryhuman residents.

On one hand, the fact that the amusement park just happened to be somewhere along their route *might* just be a coincidence, but the chances are that America planned this in some way or another. Or maybe he didn't, and he is just really lucky. Either way, they were here, at the island-famous amusement park. Standing in front of the amusement park's entrance, America felt like a little kid again. Now, considering this is an island, the amusement park wasn't overly big, but it was definitely big enough to spend the whole day inside doing its many attractions. From rollercoasters to Ferris wheels, this amusement park really was a park of amusement. Russia and America walked up to the entrance, bought their tickets, got their backs checked, and walked inside of the park. America was practically trembling with excitement. He had never gone to an amusement park, only hearing stories and reading posts about how fun it was. Seeing all the videos of Bisney World and Bisneyland always gave America an intense desire to try it out for himself. Normally, his parents would object profusely to him doing such an "intense" thing, but America's parents weren't here, were they?

Despite America's practically uncontained excitement, the two did end up stopping at a small building with lockers for rent inside. Despite its bright coloring on the outside, the inside was a lot less colorful, the lockers a weird mix of blue and green with the walls sharing the same color. Buying a locker at the kiosk, they headed over to their designated locker and shoved everything they had on themselves in it except for cash, which they put in their pockets. The locker was electronic, so all they needed was to remember a code to open it again. America ended up choosing the code: 1776. They would only have the locker for around 15 hours, so they had plenty of time as long as they kept track of, well, the time. When they were finally done with the whole locker setup, they were ready to explore the park and do all of its attractions.

At some point, America got a pamphlet and, eyeing the pamphlet for the park's biggest and most insane roller coaster, America immediately led them to it, his excitement and anticipation shooting through the roof. When Russia heard of which ride America wanted to do, he immediately warned him that that

probably wasn't the smartest idea, only for America to reply something along the lines of "since when have *I* been smart?"

Even so, this was already fun for Russia. Just seeing America smile so bright and act so ecstatic and excited had the power to make his day. Which was really good, because America was almost always excited. Once the ride came into view, America practically gasped with excitement, grabbing Russia's hand and running straight for the ride. Russia stumbled a little bit but quickly recovered, smiling as he ran towards the ride along with America. The two rushed into the line, America laughing while Russia smiled warmly at him. Just like yesterday, America smiled warmly back, his cheeks dusted with an unnoticeable red. Once they were in the line, all they could do was wait for the line to get shorter and talk while it did so. Russia couldn't tell you any sort of accurate summary of what they talked about because the subject changed so often, but it was still fun. And, as they talked- or, really, as America rambled- the line grew shorter and shorter until they were at the front of the line, America trembling with excitement. If he had the freedom of movement, Russia had no doubt that America would be bouncing off of the walls. America turned to look back at Russia, a wild grin on his face and his eyes sparkling. Russia chuckled at the expression, saying, "Are you ready?"

America's grin grew wilder as he responded, "I've never been more ready! What about you?"

Russia smiled, "As ready as you are."

America smiled back, his eyes crinkling up a little bit in pure joy. He turned back to the rollercoaster's little platform, watching intently as the rollercoaster slowed into the platform, the people on the ride looking winded yet happy. America bounced with excitement as he watched them get off. After time agonizingly crawled by, the door preventing America from hopping onto the ride earlier opened and America immediately ran into his seat, getting ready exactly how the employees instructed them to. He was shaking, but it was a good kind of shaking. The type of shaking that made you pumped for whatever would happen next.

America was ready. He was so, so ready. America grinned.

Oh, this would be so fun.

--x--

The sound of vomiting filled the small bathroom for one.

"Are you sure you're ok? You've been in there for a long time..." Russia nervously said, lightly rapping his knuckles against the bathroom door. The ride went as well as you'd expect it to be for someone who's never been on anything close to a rollercoaster before- America ended up sick and was now throwing up in the bathroom while Russia stood awkwardly outside of the door.

Honestly, the thing that sucked the most about this was that Russia didn't know how he could help America other than stand out here and do... nothing. Russia should've protested the idea more because now America was sick. He felt like it was his fault somehow, even though he knew that it logically wasn't.

The sounds of vomiting eventually devolved into harsh coughing and wheezing, as well as the hushed sound of America's sharp whispering. After a moment or so, however, everything grew still and quiet. Russia heard the sound of the toilet being flushed and the faucet going before the door was opened a few moments later, America coming out with a smile. Russia stared at him dumbly for a few seconds before worry etched into his face and he asked, "America, are you good?"

"Yep!" He chirped. Although, the answer didn't... feel like the truth. The way America held himself just felt... tired. Tired and shaky. The small wheezing sounds that came from America's mouth only served to increase Russia's concern. America seemed out of breath and tired, maybe... "Maybe we should take a break," Russia suggested. He didn't like seeing America like this. He felt so weak and fragile and... that wasn't the normal, cheery America Russia saw before they went on the ride, the America that was crazy in a good way and that made time fly faster than any bird ever could. As strange as it was, America's happiness was infectious and endearing, constantly leaving Russia smiling like a dork. And... that was why Russia was so concerned. The ride took a pretty big toll on him and... it worried Russia more than he could ever say. There was a

creeping feeling in Russia's gut that something was *really* wrong, and he wasn't about to ignore it.

"What?" America said, surprise creeping into his tone as he scoffed. "We've barely started!" He grinned, although it was more tired in nature than before, "C'mon!" He grabbed Russia's hand. "Let's go on another one!"

"Nuh-uh!" Russia disagreed, pulling up a single finger, "We *are* taking a break!" America was about to object, only for Russia to continue, "Because we're... we're not stopping for you. It's because I think I got a little sick, too," Russia quickly lied, desperately trying to stop himself from smiling as he said, "We wouldn't want me throwing up on you mid-ride, would we?"

America seemed to pause, an involuntary shudder passing through his spine. He gave Russia a weird look that, after a few moments of inspection, became speckled with concern. It was at that moment that Russia knew he had won. "Oh, fine," America gave in, "We can check out some of the stores until you feel better."

Russia smiled, "Right, I'll be sure to tell you when I feel better, then."

America rolled his eyes before smiling back, "Just tell me if it gets worse, okay? Not to brag, but I think I know puking *pretty* well."

Russia elbowed America lightly, making sure to keep a close eye on America as they walked over to the main promenade area, inspecting store after store. America tended to be an absolute goof in each store, even buying Russia a stupid shirt with the words "Ra Ra Rasputin" on it. Russia would never admit it out loud, but Russia thought that the gesture was sweet.

It wasn't until after they ate lunch that America seemed to make a relatively good recovery, and Russia gave the all-clear so that they could go on rides again. He didn't regret his decision. After all...

America's health was far more important than some stupid amusement park.

They started going on ride after ride, America looking shaken after each one, but much better than the first time. Russia generally just steered them away from the more extreme rides with the "nauseous" excuse and, luckily, America refused to go on rides without him, so it ended up working out a lot better than expected. America was happy with it, and Russia was happy that America was happy, even though they didn't go on the very big rides.

Once they ran out of roller coasters, they switched to the much less intense rides. Teacups, Gravitron, you name it- they went on them all. And, somehow, America always managed to bring the respective rides to their extremes, one example being spinning the teacup around so fast that Russia genuinely got dizzy. Even so, they laughed that off good-heartedly, smiling at each other.

They even got ice cream, America casually stealing Russia's ice cream cherry. Russia pretended that he didn't notice, but he did. It was a stupid thing for America to steal- he could've just asked- but it was also strangely endearing. After that, they did more rides, even doing a few of the carnival games that were spread throughout the amusement park. Shooting water guns at targets (America kept on "accidentally" shooting at Russia instead of the targets), throwing basketballs, tossing rings onto bottles, you name it. They never actually won anything, but it was fun.

The two kept on stealing goofy glances at each other, occasionally catching eye contact and smiling warmly. They were both enjoying themselves so much, it was almost like a dream. They had dinner at around 6, which was when America got hungry for it, and the two could barely believe how quickly the time seemed to fly when they were having fun together.

They were walking to another smaller ride America wanted to try out when America had stopped mid-street, a small carnival game catching his attention. There was nothing special about this carnival game- it was colorful and flashy just like everything else in the amusement park. It screamed for attention, and yet it fell flat in this attention-catching game because of all the flashy games surrounding it. After all, it wasn't the only colorful, flashy thing in the park. All of the rides were colorful and flashy, that's just how things were. Behind the carnival game was a rack around six feet

tall that displayed a variety of different stuffed animals. From teddy bears to cat plushies, from colors brown to cotton-candy pink, it had the perfect assortment of stuffed animals to either give to a little kid... or a date. There was a bored worker leaning against the rack, trying to hide the phone in his hand and miserably failing. All in all, it wasn't anything special.

Well, it wasn't anything special if you ignored the tremendous wave of nostalgia that hit America.

America had just... stopped in place, the memory of a similar machine flashing into his memory and then fading away like it was never there in the first place. It was unsettling because America had never gone to a carnival in his life. He's never seen this carnival game in particular and even though it wasn't *just* in carnivals, America could've sworn to you he's never seen it in person before in his entire life. All America's seen is pictures of the machine and words in a book describing it. He wouldn't- no, shouldn't- have memories of that simple game.

America's brows furrowed. Honestly, the faint image fraying at the edges of his mind was probably just one of the many pictures he's seen online and he was just overreacting. Even so, his eyes lingered on the machine, eventually traveling to the rack and landing on a simple, small, brown teddy bear with a simple red bow tied decoratively around its neck like a collar.

Turning to his right and seeing no one there, Russia paused, looking around in a panic before seeing America a few paces behind him, paused in the middle of the amusement park's road. Russia walked up to America, curiously turning to see whatever America was looking at so intently. Russia immediately recognized the game: it was a strongman. You know, that classic carnival game where you test your strength with a hammer and fail embarrassingly in front of all your friends? Yeah, that game. Russia was pretty sure he had played a kid version of it when he was really small. He remembered winning, but he doesn't have the plush to show for it anymore. Where it went, Russia had no idea.

Russia smiled slightly, "Want to go for it?"

Jumping at Russia's voice, America turned to Russia, pausing in slight confusion for a few seconds before quickly realizing he was just asked a question. He went, in a small daze, "Oh! No, not really." He laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but a large part of him wanted to do it. Even so... "I don't have the strength to win it, even if I wanted to, so I'd rather not embarrass myself."

Russia gave America a weird look. Normally he would jump into stuff like this no matter what. Was there something different about this game in particular? Russia thought for a moment. "Well, okay then. I guess we'll just have to be embarrassed together, then," He spoke, confidently walking over to the worker and buying a try at the game. America, confused, followed Russia, watching almost admiringly as Russia picked up the hammer. Russia smiled back at America, "C'mon, take it," He grinned. "We're going to do this together."

America blinked at him in surprise, only about to sputter out a "wha...?"

Russia laughed, "Oh, come on, don't leave me hanging here."

America blinked a couple more times in rapid succession before letting out an "oh!" and grabbing the handle of the hammer with both hands, Russia doing the same. America laughed at the awkwardness of their position, "Are you sure we're even allowed to do this?"

Russia smiled widely, jerking his head towards the worker, who was already back on his phone, "Does it look like he's looking?"

America couldn't help but let out a chuckle, saying with an all-too-contagious grin, "Ok, whatever you say, Rei."

Russia smirked before saying, "Okay, we're gonna do this on three. You ready?"

America nodded determinedly, his hands shaking a little bit. He felt excited and... I dunno, this, for some reason, felt *very* important, and America couldn't say that he knew why. They lifted the

hammer into the air.

"Okay, One..."

America glanced at Russia before turning back to their target, the little black bit on the machine, determination etched in his features.

"Two..."

America tensed, preparing himself to slam the hammer down.

"Three!"

They slammed the hammer down, America closing his eyes in anticipation the minute he felt the hammer hit its target. He felt an odd vibration running through his arms and, after what felt like forever waiting, America heard the sound of the bell's ring as the metal piece of the machine hit the bell at the very top. America opened his eyes, jumping with excitement and letting go of the hammer as he practically tackled Russia, "We did it, we did it!" He yelled ecstatically, laughter bubbling up and out of his chest. Russia seemed to pause when America tackled him, his mind not registering the hug for a moment, before he laughed as well, hugging America back, "Yeah, we did!" He said, smiling down at America's joy-filled face.

The worker glanced up at them, his eyes flickering between them, before shrugging and saying, his tone monotone and flat, "Congrats, which prize do you want?"

Russia looked at America, nodding and giving him permission to choose. America looked at Russia before smiling warmly, a little red dusting his face as he awkwardly let go of him. The minute he looked back at the prize rack, America's eyes were immediately dragged back to the red-ribboned teddy bear and, beaming, he pointed to it, saying, "The teddy bear!"

The employee nodded, quickly freeing the plush teddy bear from the rack and handing it to America, saying something along the lines of "here ya go."

America smiled down at it before looking gratefully up at Russia.

He squeezed the bear, a light red dusting his cheeks as he earnestly said, "Thank you so much, Russia. I couldn't have done it without you."

Russia blinked in surprise before his face quickly melted into a smile, saying, "It's no problem, Ame."

America smiled warmly, his eyes shining with joy and gratefulness. America nodded, squeezing the teddy bear tight. Once they had walked a little ways away from the strongman's little sector of the park, America commented randomly, "I think... I think I'll name him Uncle Sam Three."

Russia paused before glancing back at America with an eyebrow raised, *"Three?"*

"Yeah," America responded somewhat distantly, "Three because I remember there being a Two."

Russia chuckled, shaking his head, "Why not come up with a new name?"

"Well," America seemed to ponder before smiling brightly, "I dunno, Uncle Sam just feels *right."*

Russia rolled his eyes playfully, commenting, "Okay, whatever you say."

--x--

The sky quickly took on dark shades as the sun set and, before America knew it, the sun had disappeared, America's beloved night sky and moon taking its place. They had done almost everything... except for the Ferris wheel near the back of the park. Now, originally, Russia had planned on completely avoiding it, but America, noticing that they hadn't done it yet, insisted on them hopping on at least once. After a few moments of pestering, Russia had given in and they were now in the line to the Ferris wheel.

Instead of compartments on the Ferris wheel, there were colorful, bench-like seats with white bars that kept you in place, similarly to some roller coasters. The Ferris wheel in the park actually didn't go

that far up, but it was still far up enough to pique America's interest. As the two waited and talked about this and that, the line gradually became shorter until it was eventually their turn to climb on. Once they were secure, the Ferris wheel moved, moving the two forward and up. Slowly, the two made their way up, the Ferris wheel stopping constantly to let people enter and exit. It was honestly kind of boring, in Russia's opinion, but America looked content, so Russia let the silence be, smiling a little to himself.

As they got ever closer to the top, however, America got progressively more excited. Although the bright, colorful lights of the amusement park definitely outshone most of the stars in the sky, some of the stars were still visible and, if you looked down, you could see how the people below kinda looked like small ants. It was an interesting sight to see.

America watched all of this in silent awe, Uncle Sam Three placed comfortably on his lap. His attention constantly switched between the sky and the ground, amazed by both simultaneously. America wondered how everything might look like if he were in a rocket, blasting off into space. He wondered what it would be like, watching everything you know become smaller and smaller until it became nothing at all.

America looked back up at the sky, all sorts of happy memories coming to mind. Most of these memories were made on this amazing trip, but some of them were distant and frayed, like a pleasant dream coming from his young childhood. It made him wonder how much you really end up forgetting. I guess nobody ever really knows how much they've forgotten, huh?

All of a sudden, a shooting star dashed across the sky and a smile overtook America's face as he excitedly pointed to it, "Look, Russia! A shooting star!" He turned to Russia, beaming, "Isn't that amazing?"

Russia warmly smiled back, in awe at the rare sight, "Yeah, it is. We're really lucky to have seen it!"

America laughed, "Why thank you, I do tend to make miracles."

Russia chuckled, looking back at the sky. America looked at Russia for a beat longer before looking back at the sky. His thoughts wandered back to space, wondering what it might be like to soar across the sky just like that shooting star. Even so, America was happy like this, Russia by his side as they watched the sky together. He felt a warm and strangely familiar sense of contentment and joy overcome his heart. As long as Russia was with him, he could sit here forever, never once becoming bored. America smiled warmly.

But then his smile fell a little and America paused, turning to look at Russia. He looked at Russia for a few moments, his look curious while his mind seemed to race with a million thoughts.

Well, that's peculiar.

America smiled gently, a dusty red hitting his cheeks as he looked down at Uncle Sam Three.

Well, that's *very* peculiar.

For the very first time in his life that he could remember, America didn't want to be anywhere but here, sitting by Russia's side as they watched the night sky flicker gently.

America looked back at the sky, his smile soft and gentle and also childish, in a sense. Maybe innocent was a better word, actually.

He squeezed Uncle Sam Three, feeling himself relax completely next to Russia.

Yeah, there's nowhere else he'd rather be.

--x--

"Wait! We have to take at least *one* picture before we go!"

"One?"

"Well, no, not one. I demand at least three!" America insisted. Russia didn't understand why they had to take a picture, it was just another normal day of fun. Days were always fun with America.

"Why?" Russia asked, giving America a weird smile.

America stuck out his tongue, "We have to commemorate today! But if you don't want to be in my *very* beautiful photo, that's your loss," He finished, a bit of sass creeping into his tone.

Russia chuckled, giving in, "Ok, ok, I'm joining the picture, give me a second." Russia hauled his backpack onto his back and walked over to America before awkwardly standing next to him, waiting for him to take the photo.

America seemed to gasp with an idea, passing his phone to Russia, "Take the first photo because you're so tall!"

Russia rolled his eyes, chuckling once again as he took America's phone. He and America both smiled brightly for the photo and, once Russia had taken the picture, America snatched back his phone- which was a relatively old model- and proceeded to take two surprise photos, giving Russia bunny ears with his fingers in both. Russia, who was, one, not ready for the extra photos and, two, not even smiling for them, blinked in confusion before blushing in embarrassment, "You did *not!* Delete those!"

America laughed playfully, "Nope!" He said as he quickly stashed away his phone, ignoring Russia's annoyed and embarrassed look. He then hopped into action, rushing towards the exit of the amusement park as a big smile shone on his face, "Now, come on! We can't be late for the last bus heading for Carlisle!"

Russia gave him an annoyed look before his expression cracked into a grin again, running after America, "I *will* find a way to delete those!"

America laughed, "No, never! I'm keeping them forever!

And with that, Russia chased America out of the park, them stopping only momentarily to pay the bus fare. Laughing, they entered the bus and took one of the seats in the back, America taking the window seat while Russia took the aisle seat. After a few minutes, the bus started moving, a small screech sounding out and making Russia wince. And, with the bus finally moving, America

and Russia watched the world pass by through the bus window, not really making much conversation. They could've been tired from the long day, or they could've just liked the content quiet of the bus; either way, things were peaceful and calm, and Russia could get used to this.

But what neither of them knew then was that they were headed towards Carlisle, which wasn't *just* the second-largest city on the island... No, they were also headed towards Carlisle, the city where some dreams come true in brilliant, amazing flashes of light...

And where others die horribly before they even have the chance to take off.

Day Eleven

America groaned as the printer beeped loudly once more.

He had gone to the city's public library early in the morning to print out the photos he took the previous day (if they were printed out, Russia couldn't truly delete them) but he found himself constantly confused by the printer. AKA, it was making a big fuss, and America didn't know what to do. What, does he seem like someone who's ever not had someone help him with printers? Actually, now that he's thought about, he wasn't even sure if he's ever actually *used* a printer before.

"You're using the wrong type of paper... and that printer's out of ink."

A voice behind America went. It sounded bored and tired. America turned around to see what looked to be a black-haired college student with coffee in hand. He wore gray sweatpants and a black sweatshirt. They were both pretty baggy and could probably work as both pajamas and casual clothes. Actually, that was probably the point. He also wore red sneakers that stuck out like a sore thumb among the darkness of his outfit. He looked tired and irritated, sipping his hot cup of coffee. He seemed unfazed by its heat, though.

"Oh," America replied, chuckling slightly. God, this was awkward. "Do you think you can help me? I, uh- I don't really know how any of this works."

The college student stared at America weirdly for a few blank seconds, taking in America's appearance, before taking a sip of his coffee and then saying, a little bit of surprise creeping into his tone, "You... you, of all people, really don't know how this works?"

America smiled sheepishly, a little confused by the stranger's wording, before shaking his head. The college student sighed, lowering his coffee a little bit, "God, this has to be the weirdest day

ever. Fine, I'll help you. What are you printing?"

America gave him a surprised look at the offering of help before replying, "Three photos," America replied, pulling out his phone to show the photos. The black-haired college student looked at them before asking to grab America's phone to figure it out. America handed his phone over and, after a few moments of awkward silence only filled by the sounds of the college student tapping on America's phone, the college student handed back America's phone and started walking off after saying, "Come on, we're going to the other printer."

America quickly followed after him, and then he stopped and asked, "Wait, you do have the correct paper for printing photos, right?"

America gave him a confused look, and that seemed to be all the answer he needed. He sighed loudly before turning around and walking past America, grabbing him by the hood and practically dragging him along despite their vast strength difference. America quickly shook him off; but after the college student cast him a strict look (probably due to his obvious bad mood), America continued to follow the college student across the street to what looked to be some sort of small department store. The college student immediately went across the store, grabbing a small stack of small, glossy paper and dropping it into America's hands, "There you go. Paper exclusively for photos."

America bought it with his own money and they went back to the library, printing out 2 copies of each photo, just in case. When all was finally said and done, the college student sighed, sitting down and sipping on his coffee, "I'm free," He grumbled as if he'd just done the most taxing thing in the entire world.

America smiled nervously down at him, saying gratefully, "Thanks for helping me out there...?"

"Alan," The college student went, "My name is Alan. You're America, right?"

America jumped a little bit, nodding with a startled look on his face. How did he know?

Alan nodded stiffly back, "Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine meeting one of you guys."

America smirked, pushing down his worry and confusion as he sat down as well. Alan was just *one* person, after all, "Are you impressed?"

Alan shrugged, "Meh."

America frowned a little bit, "How come?"

"You struggled with a printer, that's all the reason I need."

America smiled at Alan's response, finding himself laughing a little bit, "Honestly, I thought you couldn't see me properly, most humans can't."

Alan gave America a weird look, "While it's true most humans can't see you countryhumans properly... only humans that *can* see you guys are allowed on the island."

America gave Alan a confused look, "What? Really?"

"Yeah," Alan responded, gesturing with his hand a little, "Shouldn't you know this...?" America's confused and surprised expression didn't change, so Alan clicked his tongue. His face remained neutral, but his tone once again showed a hint of surprise, "Well that's... interesting."

America gave Alan a puzzled look, unable to understand the reasoning behind Alan's earlier comment, "Why are only people who can see us on the island? Isn't the island supposed to protect us? I dunno, having only humans who can see us on the island seems a bit counterintuitive to that."

"I thought so, too," Alan admitted, "But then, I realized you guys aren't the only ones being protected."

America's brows furrowed, "What does that mean?"

"Well, extremist groups and governments can't use us as weapons if we're all under UN's jurisdiction, yeah?" Alan went, his gaze

meandering around the library, "Since we're under UN's care and can't get passports, we can't leave." Alan looked down at his red sneakers, "Not like I'd want to leave. Like I said, governments and extremist groups might use me for their own gain. This island is the only place where I'm safe. The only place where *we're* safe."

America gazed at Alan, his mouth becoming dry. He didn't know... any of this.

"I mean, we *all* know why this island was made," Alan continued, looking straight at America, "And it was made for good reason."

"But don't you..." America said helplessly, "But doesn't that mean you're trapped here for the rest of your life? And you're just... ok with that?"

Alan got up, saying simply and coldly, "I'd rather be trapped than used for someone else's gain."

America looked at the ground, "You shouldn't have to be trapped, though."

"You're trapped too."

America's brows furrowed and he looked up at Alan, "No, I'm not! I can leave, it's just-"

"It's just if you leave, you die," Alan finished for America. America clamped his mouth shut. He suddenly felt like a rabbit who was caught in a headlight. How- how did Alan know about his condition, he shouldn't-

Then it dawned on America. Alan *didn't* know about America's condition, he couldn't, actually. So what he meant was not just America, but countryhumans in general.

But... But countryhumans can always fall back onto their own country's protection... They're protected, even when they're off the island.

But if that's the case... *why did Alan seem so sure about himself?*

Alan sighed, "Now, I'm not a countryhuman, but I've heard enough stories. And if being used is my future if I leave the island, then your future is guaranteed to be a million times worse. I mean, you're *America.* There are probably thousands of people who want your head."

Alan then looked down, pausing. A seemingly sorry look appeared on his face as he said quietly, "And one who actually got it..."

America gulped, his grip on his seat tightening.

He... It's different when someone mentions it out loud, honestly. It's the first time he's ever heard someone else mention it. It made America pause for a moment, honestly.

You see, when your world consists of being on the internet 24/7, you find yourself delving deep in one too many Wikipedia articles. And, eventually, you get the brilliant idea of searching up your own name.

But the results weren't... the results didn't depict him, or his condition. In fact, there wasn't a word about him.

No, the results displayed someone else, someone else entirely.

He had stayed up the entire night reading the article in what felt like distilled silence. Just click clack, click clack on the screen. He even had the pleasure of reading how the other him died... Spoiler alert, he didn't have a heart condition like America. But, funnily enough, he died due to a gunshot wound in World War I.

You see, America got shot in the chest. The bullet hit his heart if we're being precise.

He... he died instantly, according to the article.

...

America never once had the guts to ask his parents about the other him. But he often found himself wondering what his predecessor was like. He often found himself wondering what his *half-brother* was like.

... I guess he'll never know now.

"But don't..." America trailed off. He didn't know what to ask anymore, really, what with his mind all jumbled with thoughts of his half-brother, "Isn't freedom worth it?"

Alan glanced at America before smiling, "I don't have to travel the world to feel free. Here, I'm free to make my own choices, I'm free to be happy. Out there..." Alan's smile faded a bit, "Out there, I'll probably be even less free than I am here... So I'm good."

Alan then glanced at his phone, America rendered silent. He looked surprised at the time before saying, "Shoot, it's Tuesday! I have a class I need to run to." He jolted up, quickly chugging his coffee and making sure his backpack was still on him. He then smiled at America for what felt like the first time that day, saying, "If you ever wanna talk again, I'm usually here from 7 AM to 9 AM. Cya!" He said, quickly booking it to catch the bus.

America could only watch, helplessly, as he raced away.

He didn't... know any of this.

--x--

"Oh, shieeEET!"

Russia laughed as America swerved around wildly, throwing his hands around in the air to find some sort of balance. He waved his hands around randomly before having the luck to turn right and slam into the half-wall of the roller rink. America reacted quickly, gripping onto it for dear life to prevent himself from falling.

Russia gave America a look, smiling a little bit as he tried to stifle laughter, "Are you good there?"

America paused for a moment, breathing heavily, "I think I just saw my life flash before my eyes," He said a little bit too seriously, making Russia snort. America frowned, turning to him, "I'm being serious!"

Russia only laughed more, saying, "I don't think rollerblades can kill

you, Cos."

"That's what *you* say, you secret rollerblading expert." America spat out suspiciously. He then paused, having a second take, "Wait. Cos?"

Russia shrugged, kicking over to where America was on the wall and stopping next to him, "Cos, Ame, Meri. I'm trying out nicknames."

America gave the taller a weird look, saying, "But why?"

"Well, because you have a nickname for me, Rei. You use it all the time, so I thought 'why not?'"

America paused, "Well, I mean..." He seemed to think about it, nervously gripping onto the half-wall tighter as he felt himself drift backwards, "I guess Rei *is* a nickname, isn't it? Huh, never really thought about it like that." Before Russia could utter a response, however, America hopped back to their previous, rollerblading-related discussion, "Also- how the heck are you so good at this? You said before we went onto the rink you've never rollerbladed before!"

Russia gave America a weird look for the subject change before responding anyway, "Yeah, I've never rollerbladed before. I've ice skated before, though. I heard they were similar, but they ended up being a lot more similar than I thought they'd be."

America raised a brow, "You've ice-skated?"

Russia gave a nervous laugh, "Yeah, my father sometimes used to smuggle us off the island during winter break, and he would always bring us to this same old house in the middle of nowhere. Near it was a lake, so my father taught us how to ice skate, saying something about wanting to make us more active and cold-resistant..." Russia scrunched up his nose in thought, "Or something along those lines." Russia seemed to ponder for another moment, saying thoughtfully, "Now that I think about it, father used to make us do a *lot* of stuff together..."

"Smuggle..." America looked curiously at Russia, the same feeling he got from talking to Alan earlier returning, "Smuggle you off the

island?"

"Hmm?" Russia looked down at America before smirking, "Yeah, he basically smuggled us off. UN apparently had this whole rule about younger countries not being able to get off the island. It was really fun, though, knowing we were breaking the rules. It just felt... special somehow."

"Why..." America's mind was racing. Getting off the island? I mean, he had always dreamed of getting off the island himself, but he didn't know there was a *rule* against it... and why against younger countryhumans specifically? "Why does that rule exist in the first place, anyway?" America said, trying to act as if he knew of the rule's existence this entire time.

Russia thought about it for a moment, "I don't remember exactly why it exists, but I do remember the word reincarnations being thrown around a lot whenever the rule was brought up." He chuckled a little bit, "I do remember that my father absolutely hated the rule, though, saying UN had no guts and that he was being overly careful with someone who was," Russia pulled up his hands, doing air-quotes, "'going to die anyway.'" Russia shrugged, dropping his hands to his sides, "Or something like that, anyway."

America looked at Russia blankly for a few seconds, the information dump not fully processing after earlier this morning. Reincarnations? Someone who was going to die anyway?

Russia glanced back at America, who was still gripping onto the half-wall for dear life. He cracked a small smile, "Are you sure you don't need help? I know you insisted on doing it by yourself earlier, but I could at least tell you what you're doing wrong."

America looked down at his feet. Yeah... yeah, he should ask for help. He needed to get his mind off of all this. His grip tightened a little bit. He shouldn't be trying to search for answers *now*... I mean, who was he kidding? He had less than a month left, there was no way he'd figure it all out. And talking to UN? That was out of the question. I mean...

America had never even seen UN before in his entire life.

"Okay, fine," America said, shooing his thoughts away and smiling, "Instruct me on how to not fall with rollerblades."

Russia smirked, "Okay, so first don't try to walk."

"*Excuse* me?" America went, making Russia laugh.

"I'm being serious, trust me!" Russia said, unable to stop grinning.

America gave his friend a look, raising his eyebrow, "For some odd reason, I'm finding it *very* hard to trust you right now."

Russia laughed a bit more before saying, "Okay, okay, let me try to rephrase that."

"Go on..."

"So, instead of walking, try waddling a little bit like a penguin, leaning your weight from one foot to the other while lifting the leg you're not leaning on. Once you get comfortable with that, try kicking off with your legs a little bit and bending your knees."

"Okay, might just be me, but now I'm like 100% sure you're messing with me."

Russia rolled his eyes, "How about this? If you ever feel like you're about to fall, I give you full permission to drag me down with you."

America paused for a split second before snorting at the mental image that came to mind at Russia's words, "I will admit, that sounds very tempting," America grinned, saying, "Okay, I'm taking you up on that deal, Rei."

As it turns out, Russia's advice wasn't all that bad and, whenever America swerved, Russia was always there to prevent him from falling. At some point, America just fell into the rhythm of it all, losing balance and violently swerving around less and less. Russia grinned at America's progress, saying, "Okay, now start kicking off with your feet a little, like you're trying to push into the ground. Bend your knees, too, it'll help you balance."

America nodded, taking a deep breath, "Okay, I can do this."

He couldn't quite keep his balance right in the beginning, but, gradually, he fell back into rhythm, notably much quicker than the first time. Suddenly, America smirked, picking up his pace. Russia made sure to keep up with America, and now that America wasn't putting all of his focus into keeping his balance, they started talking about all sorts of things. While they were talking, someone much more skilled than both of them swerved by, bumping into America. America immediately lost his balance upon the bump, swerving wildly before falling forward onto his hands and knees. It all happened so quickly that America couldn't even attempt trying to bring Russia down with him.

I mean... pshhhhhh, why would he *ever* do such a thing? It's *totally* not like he was waiting for an opportunity to drag Russia down with him, no, no...

"Ame!" Russia said in surprise, quickly skating in front of America and trying to make sure he was okay. America simply looked down at his hands, a mixture of startled and surprised as he wheezed a little bit, his heart trying to catch up with what just happened. He certainly didn't expect *that*.

"Hey, Ame? You okay?" Russia asked, worry creeping into his voice. Shaken out of his daze by Russia's voice, America looked up, pausing for a moment before nodding, "Yeah, I'm fine, just a bit startled, I guess."

Russia exhaled deeply in relief before smiling, "Good, you had me worried there."

America smiled back, "Don't worry! I'm just fine. I can handle myself."

Russia smirked a little, "Says the one who lost to a squirrel."

America became hot with embarrassment, "It was a raccoon, thank you very much."

Russia only grinned wider, saying, "Uh-huh, totally. Raccoon. I'll be sure to remember that for next time."

"Next time? What does *that* mean?"

"It means what it means," Russia said, laughing a little bit to himself before stretching his hand out for America to grab, "C'mon, you aren't staying on the floor forever now, are you?"

America paused as he stared dumbly at Russia's red hand, a strange wave of nostalgia crashing into him, just like yesterday. America quickly tried to shove the wave of nostalgia away, smirking as he grabbed onto Russia's hand. Ignoring a strangely hot sensation on his cheeks, America said playfully, "I dunno, Rei, the floor's pretty comfortable, if I do say so myself. I think the floor might just replace you as my traveling companion."

Russia chuckled a little bit, pulling America up onto his feet, "Yeouch, you'd replace me so soon? I thought we were a team, Cos."

America faked a dramatic expression, saying, "We *were* a team, Rei, but I'm afraid the floor is my new best friend. The floor is probably better than you at video games, too."

Russia laughed, lightly elbowing America, though not enough to make him fall, "Slander, I say! Tell the floor that I'm facing it in any first-person shooter game, right now."

America laughed along with Russia, pushing the taller lightly as they continued to skate around the rink, permanent smiles on their faces.

--x--

"Okay," Russia said as he sat down on the booth for the table, a plate of pizza in hand. The table was nestled in between the skating rink and a small food shop the skating rink set up. The shop mainly only sold pizza, pop, and snacks, though. America sipped on his water, watching as Russia sat down to eat. "So, are we just gonna rollerblade all day?" Russia asked.

America hummed a little, saying happily, "That was the plan!" He grabbed the pizza off of his own plate, taking a big bite out of it. It definitely wasn't the best pizza in the world, but it wasn't the worst

either. It was pretty average, honestly. "I want to become as good at this as possible."

Russia glanced at his tired feet, asking, "Aren't your ankles tired?"

"Yeah, they are," America admitted before adding on, "But that isn't gonna stop me now!"

Russia chuckled, "Okay, but tell me if you ever get *too* tired."

America nodded, humming in assent.

After they finished their food, they went back onto the rink, rollerblading around and not falling this time. About thirty minutes in, however, an announcement rolled in through the speakers embedded into the walls.

"In a few minutes, we are going to start rollerblade dodgeball! Balls will be thrown into the rink and anyone inside will be eligible for this game. If you don't want to participate, step out of the rink until the game is over."

America turned to Russia, grinning wildly and excitedly in delighted surprise, "They do things like this?"

Russia seemed just as surprised as America, saying back, "Apparently, they do."

America, pumped for the game despite his utter lack of mobility due to his inexperience, decided to stick in the rink, prepared to jump at a ball or away from a ball if need be. After a few minutes, all sorts of foam balls were thrown in. Russia, noticing a ball rolling awfully close to his skates, leaned down and grabbed the ball, being careful not to fall. Laughing a little bit, Russia threw the ball directly into America's back. America lurched forward due to the force of the blow, being lucky enough to slam into a wall instead of falling. He turned his head around, only to come face to face with Russia, who was trying desperately to keep his laughter contained. America paused, his mind connecting the dots. America suddenly grinned, yelling, "Oh, it's on!" With that, he leaned down and grabbed the ball, almost falling over in the process. He then threw

it back at Russia, who, luckily, saw it coming and lurched forward, bolting down the rink.

America laughed at Russia fleeing, saying, "Unfair! You're faster than me!" Kicking off with his feet, America tried to follow behind Russia, haphazardly picking up another ball as he went.

And so they went and, as it turns out, it's *very* easy to hit a target as tall as Russia. Even so, Russia was a lot faster than America, and it was pretty obvious throughout that he was winning. Even so, they both had a ton of fun, chasing each other around and aiming for each other's faces every chance they got. And, when America finally aimed correctly and got Russia square in the face, they both burst out laughing. Russia then proceeded to return the hit, only serving to make them laugh louder. All in all, they were having the time of their lives.

Even when the dodgeball game ended, the time continued to fly by, all because they were having fun together.

--x--

"Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a fish?"

Russia looked up from the plaque he was reading, giving America a weird look. America was staring into a small pond, crouching right next to it. In the pond were a variety of what Russia could only assume were native fish. Behind America, the sun was setting, though it was blocked by the buildings surrounding the park. As it turns out, Carlisle had all sorts of small parks scattered here and there and, after they stopped rollerblading and ate some sandwiches for dinner, America decided for them that instead of grabbing a vber, they would just walk through the city, stopping by as many parks as possible. Unlike Myrefall, this city didn't have a river cutting through it, but it did have a ton of parks and whatnot. The parks were all surprisingly peaceful, especially considering that the week leading up to the festival in Carlisle was supposedly littered with parties.

"No, I haven't," Russia answered simply, wondering where this conversation was going.

"Or... maybe I should rephrase that... Have you ever wondered what it'd be like to have the freedom of a fish? Or just any small animal, really. They can do whatever they want, whenever they want. So..." America trailed off before asking, "What would you do if there were no rules? What would you do if you could do absolutely anything feasibly possible?"

"Feasibly possible?" Russia questioned, raising a brow.

America nodded, "Yeah, like... no magic or anything. Something that can actually be done."

Russia nodded slightly, finding himself seriously mulling over the question. If he could do *anything*, what'd he do? "Can I only do one thing or multiple?" Russia asked.

America shrugged, "I don't think it matters all that much, so multiple."

Completely on its own, Russia found his mind pulling him towards an answer. An answer that, admittedly, dusted his cheeks a little with red. If he could, he'd gather the courage to tell America how he felt... but he wasn't gonna say that. Russia pushed the thought aside before answering, "Well, first, I'd finish my trip with you, then I'd make sure my family doesn't become any more distant than we already are, and... and then I'd go back to my dad's cabin in the middle of nowhere. See what he left behind. See what's still there after all these years..." Russia trailed off. His family used to do a lot of things together. But... they stopped doing those things the minute their dad. Though they stayed together in the same house, Russia wasn't ignorant. He saw the way Ukraine's eyes light up with deviance. He had heard Ukraine's hushed plans of leaving their family behind, and he had noticed how some of his siblings seemed intent on the idea as well. Their closeness, their family... it didn't last forever, to put it lightly. I mean, how could it? Their father was the only string tying them all together, and now that he was gone...

Russia knew what was coming. Most of them did. Their father shouldn't even have lasted as long as he did... but he did. Even though most knew it was coming, though, that doesn't make it any less heart-wrenching.

It didn't make Russia grieve any less.

But that's the fate of latecomers, isn't it? Russia wasn't even sure if that was the term for it... but it was Russia's fate. It was how their stupid reality worked.

"Rei?" A distorted voice seemed to ask. But Russia barely paid it any mind. Their stupid reality, and their stupid fate. Sometimes Russia resented it with all his heart. He resented how the world scrunched a hundred years' worth of time- a hundred years worth of possible *bonding*- into 14 measly years. Probably even less than that, if Russia was being honest.

...Not like his father used their limited time all that well.

Sure, he taught them how to fend for themselves and how to shoot and all sorts of other things... but he also often obsessed over things- wars, to be more specific- that had already passed. Russia remembered it vividly, how his father read book after book, trying to find ways to reincarnate or maybe even just further delay the day he'd collapse just like his country di-

"Rei!"

Russia was suddenly snapped out of his thoughts, jolting when he saw a concerned America a mere few inches away. His cheeks flushed a slight red at the proximity and he backed up a bit, saying a little disorientedly, "Hi?"

America sighed, backing up a little as well. "You were in space for a second there," America grinned, saying, "I'm kinda jealous you went up there before me. But seriously, you good? You were spaced out for like five minutes. But don't quote me on that, I wasn't timing you or anything."

"Oh-" Russia awkwardly said, rubbing his neck, "Sorry about that, you were saying...?"

America paused before laughing slightly, elbowing Russia slightly as he walked past him, "Don't worry about it, let's just go to the next park!"

Russia gave America, who was turned away from him, a nervous smile, moving to follow him, "You sure? I didn't miss anything important, right?"

America laughed again, "Nope, you're good!" He looked to the side, his smile faltered a little bit, "It didn't really matter anyway, I just gave my own answer to the question I gave you."

"Really?" Russia questioned before scoffing, curiosity pricking at him, "Well, now you *have* to tell me!"

"Nope!" America snorted, "You didn't hear me the first time, so it's your loss!"

Russia gave America a wonky smile, "Now I just *have* to figure it out."

"Okay then," America smirked, "Ten dollars says you're not gonna find out within a week from today."

"And ten says I will," Russia shot back, a determined look flashing in his eyes.

"Ya-huh," America's smirk only grew as he laughed good-heartedly, "Something tells me I'll be ten dollars richer in seven days."

"Whatever you have to tell yourself to be happy, Ame."

America snorted at that, playfully elbowing Russia in the side, "Wow, okay, prepare to be proven wrong, Rei!"

Russia laughed as well, playfully bumping America back, a huge smile on his face. It was impossible not to smile with America around. Maybe it was strange but... Russia almost couldn't imagine their little journey stopping. He just... he had so much fun with America that he simply couldn't imagine it ever stopping, them having fun together, day after day. A thought lingered at the cusp of Russia's mind, making his smile falter.

But everything has to end eventually, right?

What... what then?

Russia wasn't sure. He knows he just said what he'd do a few moments earlier but... but even though piecing his family back together *might* be possible, he was also aware of the fact there probably wasn't much he could do now. The minute his siblings got old enough, they would most definitely leave. Some would leave sooner than others, sure... but they'll all leave eventually, and Russia didn't want to lose them. They were all he had, now that their father was six feet under.

Well... Actually, that may not be so true anymore.

Because he had America.

But, admittedly, even *that* whole thing was a muddled mess. Russia's feelings for America are... they're complicated, to say the least. I mean, Russia knew what he was feeling. He knew that he had a crush, he had known this for almost a week now. And yet... he still wasn't sure if he wanted to act on his feelings. I mean, sure, one minute, he's so sure of what he wants to do with them, and the next he isn't.

Well... what's stopping him from acting on his feelings?

It's very simple. Heck, Russia's mulled it over so many times he knows what's stopping him by heart. The fact of the matter is, loving America goes against *everything* he's been taught. Russia was fine personally with people loving whoever they want but... but Russia loving America somehow felt *wrong*. And it felt wrong simply because Russia was taught it was wrong his entire life.

But, even so... Loving America also felt so *right*. Russia felt so happy and light whenever he was around America, and he often found himself making an effort to make America happy, too. Despite everything, not loving America seemed impossible to do. There was just something about America that drew Russia in, that made Russia smile and laugh, and that made his cheeks dust red and his heart beat just the slightest bit faster and happier. There was something about America that somehow made the world happier and brighter and just all-around more tolerable. It was like that one french saying Russia had heard, "La vie en rose-" seeing life through a rose-tinted glass.

That's what it was. No matter what, life with America was just... *better* somehow. And if this was what it was like for Russia now, he could only imagine how happy he would be if they become something *more* than friends...

But now Russia's getting ahead of himself. And, he had a decision to make. A decision that he knew would change *everything*.

He either could turn his back on everything he's been taught and confess his feelings, staying true to himself and letting himself see life through that amazing rose-tinted glass, hopefully alongside America...

Or...

Or he could take a step back.

He could resign himself to the position of Rei, America's best friend. No one, not even America, would ever know of Russia's feelings. His feelings would be locked away forever, in a place no one could ever find them. Maybe, over time, Russia could forget about those feelings and that rose-tinted glass... or maybe he won't forget. Maybe he'd have to suffer through years and years of being close to America, but never close enough.

...

Russia didn't know what path he would end up choosing. Not yet.

But... he knew that he'd figure it out eventually. After all, he had all the time in the world.

I mean, it's not like America's going anywhere, right?

Russia finally tuned back into the world and smiled at America, chuckling, "Me? Proven wrong? I dunno, I guess we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

Yeah, they had all the time in the world...

Didn't they?

Day Twelve

"So why the heck are you bothering me again?" Alan spoke, his hands busy typing something on his laptop.

"What, am I not allowed to come here, to the *public* library?" America said with a small, mischievous grin.

Alan grumbled a little bit, rolling his eyes, before continuing on his project. America gave him a look before glancing around the library, a relatively neutral expression on his face. The library was bigger than it seemed on the outside- intricate stone pillars stretching up into the second floor, and a commons space that was completely open all the way up. In the commons space, there were several wooden chairs and tables neatly ordered into rows and columns... In a way, the walls (and ceiling) of the library kinda reminded him of 19th-century architecture, but the building honestly didn't seem *that* old.

Alan and America were in the commons area in the middle of the library, surrounded by a series of pillars, and then a sea of bookshelves. They obviously weren't the only people there, but it felt like they were, honestly. If you ignored the occasional second looks, no one seemed all that deterred by America's presence.

You would never be able to tell that they could recognize America in his true form.

It was odd, it really was.

Though America admittedly didn't know much, he knew enough to know that *this*... was odd, strange- them not even casting him so much as a third glance or coming up to him with this whole spiel. It made him wonder what made them so disinterested in him.

It made him wonder what the humans here were taught.

Slowly fading out of his thoughts, America's eyes wandered back to

Alan. After buzzing his lips a little bit, America asked, "Do you know when this island was set up? Like- when it started?"

Alan, however, simply ignored America, seemingly *intensely* concentrated on his schoolwork. America stifled a small laugh before saying, "Alaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnn, if you don't listen to me I'm gonna do something weird in front of everyone and be super loud *and* completely embarrass you."

It was at that that Alan's eyes shot up to meet America's, his expression almost that of a frustrated, annoyed parent. After a few frustrated moments, he rolled his eyes, closing up his laptop with a sigh. "Just make it quick."

"Do you know when and why this whole island was set up for countryhumans?" America asked. He could've looked it up, but... it kind of felt like a forbidden subject. Taboo, maybe.

Alan sighed once more, opening up his laptop, "Just search it up."

America furrowed his brows, pouting a little bit, "Hmmm, I dunno... That seems weird."

"Says the person who'd embarrass himself over literally nothing."

"Hey!" America spoke with a grin and a fake offended tone, "My curiosity is not 'literally nothing,' take that back!"

Alan grinned at that, "I dunno, it sure sounds like nothing. Also, *you're* the countryhuman. You know, *an immortal being.* For all I know, you're hundreds of years old and are just messing with me. My *mere* human lifespan must be nothing to you, oh great one," Alan joked with a smile on his face, his eyes still glued to his screen.

Lucky for him, then, cause he managed to miss how America's expression fell.

Right. *Immortality*.

What a hoax, right? To be robbed of the one thing your species is known the most for. After all, past the age of 25... Countryhumans

don't age. As long as they avoid guns and assassinations and stop their country from collapsing or somehow ride the wave of revolutions and coups into ruling another, separate country from their original... they can live... *forever*.

What luck, huh? To be born with a bomb on your heart. To know that your days are numbered- that your *hours* are numbered.

And *America's* successor was supposed to be so great, too.

His 'reincarnation.'

But that 'reincarnation' will probably never live to fulfill his supposed destiny- he will probably *never* be able to fill the shoes that his predecessor left behind.

It truly is too bad.

But Alan didn't know that. He didn't know any of this.

...

And I'm not too sure if America knows all of this, either, that 'reincarnation.'

America gulped nervously, trying to keep his building dread from choking his words and distorting his tone, "Oh, right. But, actually..." He seemed to trail off, his expression briefly contorting, before he spoke, "I was actually born 17 years ago, so... you'd be the older one here, oh great sage." He finished off in a somewhat forced, joking tone and an equally forced smile.

Alan seemed to pause completely, jerking his head up to look at America, his eyes blinking rapidly, "Wha- you're... 17?" He spoke, his tone one of complete shock.

America blinked at Alan before hesitantly saying, "Um... yeah?"

Alan blinked at America in disbelief for a few moments more, his head tilting just the slightest bit as he reached forward and pulled his laptop shut, "You know what? I'm highly interested now. I have a friend majoring in history that I can text, what questions do you

have?"

America suddenly grinned wide, blurting out a sudden "yes!" as he threw his fist up in the air in victory. Ignoring Alan's bewildered yet vaguely amused look, America hopped off the table, already rapid-firing his endless questions at Alan, who tried his best to write them all down.

It was time to get some answers.

--x--

"You know, I, for some reason, don't remember how we got here."

America laughed before saying with a dorky smile, "Yeah, same."

Russia frowned a little bit, glancing around with his brows furrowed, "Weren't we heading towards the aquarium through the boardwalk?"

"Yes, yes we were," America confirmed as he kicked a small rock, aiming for a nearby bush. Though, sadly, he missed, the rock ricocheting off the nearby wall instead. America's smile briefly curled downward into a frown and he walked up to the rock, ready to attempt kicking it into the bush once more.

"So- uh... why are we no longer at the boardwalk?" Russia questioned, confusedly looking around at their surroundings cause, fun fact, they were *not* at the boardwalk. Not only was there no sea in sight, but they were also surrounded by buildings on all sides. They were in the city, not on the boardwalk. Though technically they'd still be *in* the city on the boardwalk, I think you get my point.

America bit his lip slightly, kicking the rock once more. Watching it land straight into the bush, America laughed in victory, saying awfully loud, "I have *no* idea!"

Russia turned in America's direction, giving him an odd, amused look. With a small sigh, he pulled out his phone and opened up goggle maps. After a bit of searching, he said thoughtfully, "Well, we *could* still go to the aquarium, but there's a museum pretty close

to us- and it's in the direction of the aquarium from where we are currently." He looked up from his phone momentarily, asking, "You *did* want to go to a museum, right?"

"Yep!" America smiled, "Let's just head over to the museum first, then! How far away is it?"

"A twenty minute walk."

"Oh, that's not too bad!" America grinned, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet, "How about this- we race there! Whoever's last... is a chicken butt."

"I-" Russia gave America a weird look, a small, confused laugh escaping his lips, "what?"

"You heard me!" America nodded to himself with a small grin on his face, fighting back sudden laughter. Then, all-too-suddenly, America quickly and loudly blurted out, "321go!" With that, America suddenly shot forward, practically sprinting ahead.

Russia watched America run off for a few moments before bursting out into laughter, almost doubling over with laughter. After a few moments of calming down, he yelled to the retreating figure, a bright smile on his face, "Hey, America! The museum's in the other direction!"

America seemed to stop for a few seconds before exclaiming loudly, loudly enough for Russia to hear, even with the distance between them, *"Shoot!"*

With that, Russia lost it, bursting out into laughter once more.

...

It was always so refreshing, being in America's company.

--x--

America and Russia stood at the doors of a history museum, America being out of breath while Russia stood there, a seemingly permanent smile stuck on his face. "So..." He began to tease, "What's

it like being a chicken butt, America?"

America wheezed a little, being doubled over and gripping his knees. After a few moments, he almost breathlessly said, "So mean, so *very* mean."

Russia snorted a little bit, reaching his hand down into America's field of vision, "Okay, chicken butt. Let's get some water before you die or something."

Ouch.

America forced back a wince and, instead, forced a small grin as he grabbed Russia's hand, still a little breathless as he spoke, "Okay, Mr. Wilderness Man."

Russia gave him an odd look, grinning as he joked back, "Yeah, yeah, Mr 'I've never run a mile in my life.'"

Oh, man, ouch. Yeah, America probably *hasn't* run a mile. At least... not all at once. It's pretty hard to be athletic when your heart's as wack as America's.

It's hard to be athletic when your heart wants to stop beating on you.

After buying America a quick bottle of water, they entered the museum and, after quickly paying for admission, they realized that this museum was about a specific section of history: WW2. And that's... that war was horrific. Not to mention, it isn't exactly nice hearing about America's own mom and dad going to war. It isn't exactly nice to read about how his mom got overrun by German forces.

It isn't nice to read about how she almost died.

But... they didn't leave, even when they gave each other odd looks. I mean... they already paid for admission, right?

But, even so... there was something starkly different between the two of them upon exploring the museum. Russia seemed... almost desensitized by it, the stories told in the museum. But America

wasn't, and he...

He couldn't help but feel his heart ache at all the horrible stuff his parents had to go through.

Stumbling upon the manufacturing side of the museum, however, America found himself regaining the pep in his step. Why? Well, it was all about him! Er, his country. There was a whole section of the museum discussing the insane American manufacturing fueling a large part of the war. Reading about the Riveters and whatnot... it was really cool.

And America may have gotten sucked into it just a little bit.

He found himself wondering and dreaming as he read thing after thing about his own country, his own *people.* Man, if only America could go there. Go to the country he's supposed to represent. The country he... *is.* That country across the sea that's... *him*, in a sense. Him in a sense that he couldn't begin to understand. Him in a sense that he already understood.

But out of everything, he kind of... he kind of wished that they had gone to a WWI museum. Because then... he could've read about his brother.

His brother... "America."

The brother his parents refuse to talk about.

Time, its own master, flew by quickly that day. After passing by section after section of the museum, it was getting later and later into the day, and America and Russia started having less and less of the museum to explore. And, unfortunately, the time raced on and, before the two knew it, it was 6 pm, and they only had one part of the museum left to explore. It was near the exit of the museum- the D-Day exhibit.

They passed through it much like the others, passively reading the information presented to them, but mostly just skimming through. It wasn't long before Russia had skimmed through, and was waiting for America near the exit.

But America was taking his time because... well, something seemed peculiar about how the Canadian troops were phrased sometimes. It was odd in a way America couldn't explain. But, he couldn't find the reason why. There was nothing to explain the odd wording, and nothing to quell his subtle, annoying curiosity. Frowning, America found himself lingering near the end of the exhibit, that odd feeling that he was... *missing* something keeping his feet trapped in place.

"America, come on!" Russia finally called, noticing America just.... standing there.

America jerked at his name, whipping around to face Russia. He blinked at Russia for a few seconds before turning back around, studying the exhibit for a few moments. Finding nothing once more, America sighed. So much for that. Turning around, America smiled softly at the waiting Russian, "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

With that, the two raced out the door, ready to go on their next adventure: the aquarium by the boardwalk.

Though... as it turned out, America *did* miss something in that exhibit. On the opposite wall, there was a small, lonely plaque. On the plaque, these words were inscribed:

"Insisting on going with his men in this horrendous, costly battle, Canada Ottawa died a few days after D-Day due to blood loss and a series of other complications. Canada was the final of Britain's four natural countryhuman children to die."

--x--

It wasn't long before they reached the aquarium, the odd yet oddly beautiful building before them. The sun was to their left and, though it was low in the sky, it hadn't set yet, the world still being cast in the warm shades of the day. Even so, it was all dimmer, the shadows taller, and the vision of the coming sunset was awfully easy to imagine, especially with the sun wavering the way it did in the water's reflection. It was all too easy to imagine the hints of orange on the horizon stretching across the sky. But, unfortunately, we weren't here to admire the sky...

We're here to admire some wonky fish!

Laughing a little bit, America rushed inside, saying, "Oh, come on, Rei! Let's hurry up so that we can at least see *something* before they close for the night! We didn't come all the way out here for nothing!"

Russia laughed a little at America's excitement, running after the American, "Oh, no, of *course* we walked all this way for nothing. What are you talking about, America?"

America snorted, slowing down his pace and stopping in front of the receptionist desk, or... whatever it would be called in an aquarium. They paid for admission (they're doing that a lot lately, aren't they?) and headed into the aquarium, grabbing a map as they went. Immediately, one exhibit caught America's attention.

"Woah!" He spoke, his tone already excited as he turned a little to look at Russia, "You can pet stingrays here! And touch starfish!"

Russia raised an eyebrow, looking at his own map, "Now, that doesn't sound terrifying for the sea creatures *at all.*"

America made a weird sound (it sounded almost like a restrained laugh), immediately elbowing Russia in the side. Russia jerked away at the contact, a strangled sound escaping his throat at the sharp pain and amusement dancing in his gaze as he laughed, "What! It's most definitely terrifying."

America started laughing a little bit, saying somewhat dramatically, "Oh my gosh. You've absolutely *ruined* it... but I'm still doing it anyway."

Russia snorted a little bit, following after America as he marched onward.

And march onward they did. Even after they visited the stingrays, they just kept on exploring exhibit after exhibit, America getting more excited and in awe as time went on. (America had touched *one* stingray in the stingray exhibit before jerking back, his eyes wide as he exclaimed that "they felt so weird!" He mentioned how

they felt oddly and wrongly rubbery and, noticing that Russia was just about ready to burst out into laughter at his reaction, they moved on.) If he was being honest, Russia slowly found that this was becoming more and more reminiscent of their planetarium visit. It was mostly just America excitedly leading the two of them through the various exhibits, and Russia's heart being warmed by watching America's excitement.

He really... He did love America a lot.

And, though it seems odd, seeing America all excited about such simple things like this... It only made Russia love him more. Seeing America happy... it automatically made Russia so inexplicably happy as well. He couldn't explain it if he tried. He just... *adored* America so much.

Eventually, as they meandered into one of the final exhibits left, they stumbled upon a little tunnel that cut *through* a fish tank. America's eyes widened hilariously wide at the sight. After a few moments of what might've been shocked pause, America entered the tunnel, his hand lingering and touching the side of the tank as he walked through the tunnel, his eyes wide with wonder as he kept on looking to the sides and up above, where glittering fish swam. Finding himself smiling, Russia entered the tunnel as well, stepping into place beside America, who was brought to silence by the sight.

It was... so peaceful.

Russia loved every second of this...

This moment that spoke so much louder than any words could.

And, as you could probably expect, It didn't take long after that before they had gone to this one part of the aquarium that just... *mesmerized* America completely. They had entered a fairly large, semi-circular room, the curved, circular wall consisting of one large tank for a variety of sea life. All sorts of coral, sea slugs, fish... All of them swimming- no, *dancing*- in some sort of elaborate dance. Their scales shimmered as they drifted along. They were somehow being carried by the barely noticeable current in their tank, but they were also swimming along with that current and somehow *mastering* it at

the same time.

America couldn't explain the wondrous sight if he tried.

He had been struck with awe by many things in their little journey of this scrap of the sea on land... but *this* was what mesmerized him the most. Not the tunnel, not touching the stingrays... *this* was what stuck with him- this sight, this dimly lit room... everything.

The fish had just... caught his attention with their elaborate, soundless dance, and America found himself wanting to join, walking up to the glass and gently putting his hand on it. He put his hand on the glass so gently that one might believe he was afraid of breaking the glass if he put too much pressure on it. America was just... in so much awe.

And Russia got to watch this tremendous moment, a smile etched permanently onto his face. He couldn't say he understood America's awe and wonder... but he certainly understood America's faint yet excited smile. He understood the excitement and joy that so clearly danced on America's expression, and he understood the happiness that fluttered in his own heart in response.

He understood *that*.

So, with a warm and gentle smile on his face, Russia sat down on a nearby bench, watching America's wonder adoringly as he had this entire time. After a few moments of looking at the fish with pure awe, however, America then turned his head a little to look around momentarily, his gaze eventually meeting Russia's own. Though Russia certainly could've imagined it in the dim light, for a split second, America seemed to pause, red dusting his cheeks as they just... gazed into each other's eyes. Russia's eyes widened after a few moments of surprise, red dusting his cheeks as well. America soundlessly snorted at the little, awkward exchange, a warm smile taking to his lips.

With that, America walked over to where Russia sat, sitting down next to him with a smile before continuing to look at the glowing, wondrous sight of shimmering fish before them. His blush stubbornly persistent, Russia forced himself to look forward as well,

finally taking in the beauty of the shimmering, dancing fish now that America's own beauty was out of sight.

Even so... Russia couldn't focus on them all that well.

Not with America so close.

... Not with America's hand so close to his.

They were just... so oddly close, sitting on that bench. Their hands were inches away from each other's and Russia couldn't help but wonder... he couldn't help but wonder what would happen if he just... took the risk- if he took America's hand in his. What would happen then?

Would... would America hold his hand back?

The spontaneous thought, however, was also a fleeting one, quickly drifting away from Russia. It was a bad idea, anyway. America didn't like him like that. They were just...

...

Time seemed to pause. It seemed to pause so subtly and gracefully that it was almost like it hadn't even paused at all. Not to mention, Russia found himself taken aback.

For a split moment...

The fish looked like *stars*.

Stars glimmering in the night sky.

They looked like something Russia had seen long ago.

But why would that make him pause?

It made no sense, even though...

Even though, in the moment, Russia felt an inexplicable sense of familiarity wash over him. A sense that he'd done this before. Deja vu, maybe.

Was it... was it from the ferris wheel, maybe?

... No, that wasn't it. It never would be.

It was something else.

A sight just like this, a night...

A night where the moon shone above and, when squinting your eyes, the stars would shimmer and glimmer in a way that made them seem like lost porcupines just trying to find their way home.

But these weren't the stars, and that moment was long forgotten.

But those thoughts- those *feelings* more real than the night sky itself- quickly faded away, the memory and illusion of stars being porcupines getting pulled back into the depths of Russia's mind. So, blinking at the fish, Russia just... *sat* there for a little while, trying to remember that familiarity, trying to recall an experience just like this one...

But, after a little while without success, Russia sighed and, chuckling, found himself smiling warmly. Not at the vaguely-familiar sight before him, but, rather, taking in the memory of this night... afternoon? Evening?

Maybe his wave of familiarity was just deja vu from a dream. Maybe there was no real meaning behind any of this, but... Russia relished this moment anyway. He relished it because, for some reason, it felt like it would never happen again. This carefully crafted scene, where familiarity and calm washed over him like waves on the shore.

Washed over them *both* like waves on a shore.

As it would turn out, Russia was right...

Just not in the way his subconscious expected, or meant.

...

His time was running out.

Their time was running out.